

Journeying through the pandemic

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As people across the U.S. and the world struggle with the challenge of living in societies ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, the journey mindset described in the recent paper by Szu-chi Huang and Jennifer Aaker could prove to be a useful tool. Thinking in terms of a journey rather than a destination can help virus survivors and health care

providers cope with post-traumatic stress.

Such a mindset can also increase the likelihood that people who learn measures for protecting themselves against the virus—and future contagions—will continue to practice those behaviors.

As Aaker points out, at its core the journey mindset is about [personal growth](#) in response to challenges. "Looking back at [negative experiences](#) as well as positive ones fuels progress moving forward," she notes. In addition to her work with Huang and research that she and colleagues published in 2019 on learning from negative experiences, she cites psychologist Stephen Joseph's 2011 book "What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth," and research in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks that shows how soldiering through a catastrophe can lead to personal transformation.

"The people who experience moderate to high levels of post-[traumatic stress](#) following a crisis are also the ones who grow the most psychologically as a result of the trauma," Aaker says. "This finding is surprising because we so often hear about post-traumatic stress leading to PTSD. But that's only part of the story. Those who grew were those who were able to make meaning out of tragedy. They dug deeper into themselves to make sense of what happened and how it changed them, which corresponds to research that Aaker has done with Kathleen Vohs and Rhia Catapano on how negative experiences stimulate comprehension and boost meaning.

Visualize Progress

Survivors' ability to find meaning in trauma could be augmented by adoption of the journey mindset, which can be taught through a regimen of guided visualization, diary-keeping, and other exercises. Huang and Aaker also have contemplated the use of new technology, such as

artificial intelligence applications that would learn from users and provide useful feedback and reinforcement during the journey.

More broadly, Huang thinks that visualizing personal progress and valuing small accomplishments along the way could help to sustain those who might otherwise lose hope of ever returning to their normal everyday lives.

"Having a journey mindset can help," Huang explains. "As we think about navigating COVID-19 and how it has impacted our lives, a focus solely on the destination can result in a lot of frustration, because if a problem is not solved right away and we fail at reaching our destination, all seems lost.

"A journey mindset helps us focus on the incremental changes and growth we accumulate along the way. Perhaps we are connecting with old friends and family more. Perhaps we find a different way to get work done. Perhaps we learn how to cook at home. Perhaps we pick up a new hobby. All of these are skills and lessons that we can carry on even after COVID-19.

"Once people learn how to best cope with these challenges, the journey mindset can reinforce such growth and thus sustain people's mental health in the future—especially when future triggers or stressors occur."

Stay Connected

Aaker says that as we head into the longer struggle to overcome COVID-19 and return to normal life, it's important for people to reflect back on the first few months of the outbreak and note what they've learned about themselves and others from getting through the experience.

"The journey mindset is about the continuation from our past meaningful successes and failures to the present moment and into the future," she explains. "Success does not exist in isolation—it has a past and it needs to be sustained into the future."

Aaker and Huang also emphasize that the pandemic journey cannot be completed alone, and that we need others to support and challenge us. "Learning how to leverage our family and friends helps us sustain our goal success," Aaker says.

When people get to the point where all they want is to ignore or avoid social information, as documented in research that Huang published in 2018, it is by reaching out and staying connected to their social network that they can regain the motivation to move forward.

Huang and Aaker also emphasize that it's important to recognize that the journey may turn out to be far longer than envisioned if COVID-19 turns out not to be a crisis with a clear-cut resolution, but rather a harbinger of a future in which people increasingly will have to cope with pandemics. If that's the case, they say that the lessons learned and progress achieved through the [journey mindset](#) may help people survive what is to come.

More information: It's the journey, not the destination: How metaphor drives growth after goal attainment.

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