

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

11-2020

Dealing with COVID-19 and emerging stronger from it

David CHAN

Singapore Management University, davidchan@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Public Health Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology Commons](#)

Citation

CHAN, David, "Dealing with COVID-19 and emerging stronger from it" (2020). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3383.

https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3383

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3383

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Dealing with COVID-19 and emerging stronger from it

17 Nov 2020

Whether it is reacting to news on COVID-19 cases, following safe management rules, adapting to changes at work, assessing leadership and public responses to the coronavirus crisis, or navigating post-pandemic realities, it is all part of understanding how humans think, feel, and behave, says SMU Professor David Chan.

Published in Research@SMU, November 2020.

<https://research.smu.edu.sg/news/2020/nov/17/dealing-covid-19-and-emerging-stronger-it>

Whether it is reacting to news on COVID-19 cases, following safe management rules, adapting to changes at work, assessing leadership and public responses to the coronavirus crisis, or navigating post-pandemic realities, it is all part of understanding how humans think, feel, and behave, says SMU Professor David Chan.

The psychology professor and director of the SMU Behavioural Sciences Institute is well placed to explain why and how this matters – he has contributed significantly to public discourse on COVID-19 throughout this year and he is the author of the book, *Combating a crisis: The psychology of Singapore's response to COVID-19*.

SMU Office of Research and Tech Transfer caught up with Professor Chan to find out more about his new bestseller book and what it takes to deal with this protracted COVID-19 crisis.

Q: Why did you decide to write this book on COVID-19?

It was the dynamic way that the pandemic was developing and how we responded to it, both globally and locally. The rapidly evolving public health crisis, with its multifaceted dimensions that I described in the opening chapter, affected the lived experiences of everyone and it moved me to write the book. It was clear that COVID-19 had caused, and would continue to cause, great disruptions to lives, livelihoods, ways of life, and quality of life. We need to learn to live with the coronavirus for a long time, even as we combat the coronavirus crisis collectively and fight our own daily battles individually. It is important to draw lessons from our experiences from the first few months of the outbreak, understand the human psychology of our response to the demands and changes resulting from COVID-19, adapt to the ongoing and upcoming challenges, and prepare for post-pandemic realities.

Q: What were some of the key issues that you were concerned about?

Recall that in a short span of several weeks from it was first reported in Wuhan, the novel coronavirus disease was exported beyond other cities and provinces in China to countries around the world. By April, more than 90 percent of countries had imposed some form of strict containment and mitigation measures to control the community spread of the disease. The highly infectious coronavirus was spreading rapidly and the daily new cases were increasing exponentially. It was clear, and it remains true today, that the actual number of infections is likely very much larger than the official number of confirmed cases – even though some countries have stepped up testing since the beginning of the outbreak, many countries are testing only symptomatic or serious cases.

The rapidly evolving global crisis affected all areas of our lives. The economic fallout has been immense. With businesses, jobs, production, and consumption directly affected by travel bans and physical lockdowns, the pandemic caused great economic disruptions with dire consequences for countries, both locally and globally. Not only were there clear public health and economic impact, the physical, social, and political toll of the lockdowns were also evident.

Across the world, lockdowns were affecting revenue and income but more importantly threatening the survival of businesses and costing millions of people their jobs. Countries saw sharp rises in retrenchment, unemployment, and job losses. These official figures, which are lagged indicators, are underestimates of the actual dire situation,

and they do not capture the full detrimental impact that the lockdowns and disruptions on production and consumption had on businesses, job losses, and people's livelihoods.

Beyond economics and finances, there were also disruptions to freedom of movement, physical gatherings, and routine social interactions as isolation, stay home orders, and social distancing measures were imposed. Anecdotal evidence and monthly statistics raised concerns that the economic impact and control measures such as stay home requirements during lockdown periods could contribute to unintended negative consequences such as triggering family dispute, domestic violence and abuse, psychological distress, and even suicides.

People everywhere were looking to their leaders to solve problems because leaders make decisions on control and mitigation measures. For every city and country, there were not just economic threats but also clear risks of psychological distress, family problems, social unrest, and political cost if lockdowns were maintained or extended for long periods.

Without a doubt, in almost every city and country, the coronavirus crisis caused great disruptions to the lives and livelihoods of individuals, families, organizations, and communities. Beyond public health, there were significant costs all round – physical, economic, social, psychological, and political. The nature and extent of the demands that we need to adapt to, and our efficacy in dealing with them, also change over time and in different ways.

In short, COVID-19 has affected all domains of life. We will continue to experience adaptability situations at multiple levels and for multiple groups, with multiple dimensions and multiple facets of change. These inter-related demands, changes, and outcomes will continue to occur and evolve. In this protracted crisis, the episodes we encounter and our lived experiences will produce a diversity of attitudes, a variety of emotions, and a plethora of actions. How we think, feel, and behave may be adaptive or maladaptive. For example, our attitudes and actions may help by approaching issues based on evidence, values, and resilience, or they may hurt by exacerbating problems due to incompetence, human biases, and self-interests.

Be they adaptive or maladaptive, our responses in dealing with the demands in the crisis situations produce consequences that we can now learn from, so that we can better adjust to events as they temporally unfold. Indeed, it will be too late if we wait for a declaration of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic before we review and draw lessons for how we could function adaptively in the post-pandemic “new normal”.

Q: Why focus on the psychology of our response?

In various media outlets, much has been written or said about the economic impact and the social-political issues involved in the ongoing outbreak, including the implications for possible post-pandemic realities. In comparison, much less attention has been given to the psychology of our response in combating the crisis. As the global pandemic evolved rapidly and control measures were tightened or eased, it becomes more evident that the psychology of response in the coronavirus crisis has multifaceted dimensions. There were various human emotions to manage, differences and disagreements to deal with, judgements and decisions to make, and attitudes and actions to prevent, reinforce, or encourage.

As the immense impact of the pandemic is felt, and as it becomes quite clear that COVID-19 is here to stay for a long time, we also begin to see issues concerning the psychology of resilience, collaboration, and futures thinking at the individual, group, organisational, national, and international levels.

- We need to attend to and address many psychological questions if we want to emerge well from the crisis. Some examples that I discussed in the book are:
- Why do leaders and the people they lead sometimes have such different interpretations of the same situation even when they have access to the same available facts and information?
- How can we change behaviours so that people can be more socially responsible?
- How do we deal with the varieties of negative emotions resulting from COVID-19 and respond better to the difficult situations?
- How do we function and adapt to the various measures to contain the outbreak such as having to work from home and movement restriction orders?
- How do leaders' attitudes and actions affect the people they lead, and how can they lead better?
- How can we be more psychologically prepared, both as individuals and a society, to meet the different demands of the evolving COVID-19 situation and possible post-pandemic realities?

Addressing big questions such as these and understanding the underlying psychology is critical because it facilitates adaptive functioning as we battle the coronavirus. In this protracted crisis of pandemic proportions, people must understand human reactions and learn to react adequately. Leaders too need to learn quickly to effectively manage these public reactions, and how people react is also influenced by their leaders' attitudes and actions. That was why I readily agreed when World Scientific (the book publisher) invited me to write a book on Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the book, I focused on the human psychology of our emotions, judgements, decisions, attitudes, and actions in various contexts of the coronavirus crisis.

Q: In your book, as well as in the various commentaries, interviews and public talks you have done throughout this year, you shared numerous insights on reacting appropriately in terms of safe management rules and social responsibility. In Singapore, are we over-doing things or are we not doing enough?

The underlying question is this: Are we too conservative or are we too complacent? In fact, it need not be contradictory to caution against both. It does not matter who we are – it is human nature to tend to either over-react or under-react in crisis situations. So, in this COVID-19 crisis, every one of us can learn to be more sensible and sensitive.

Much has been said about not over-reacting to the chances of getting infected and not let fear and anxiety consume us. This continues to be important, especially when the coronavirus outbreak is likely to stay with us for a prolonged period. But it is equally important to deal with the problem of under-reacting. We need to do much more in enhancing hygiene habits, and more fundamentally, in social responsibility.

It is natural to be angry and complain about people who are socially irresponsible. But instead of letting gripe consume us, each of us can galvanise others into positive actions. Start first with ourselves and ensure that we personally practise what we preach. Be a role model to others and a positive influence to our family, friends and colleagues. We could use the various dimensions in what I call the VINCE model (values, image, norms, convenience, enforcement) to change attitudes and actions, particularly those concerning health behaviours and social responsibility.

Q: Globally, yours is probably the first published book on leadership and public responses to COVID-19, and definitely the first on Singapore's response. As a bestseller, it would have been read by leaders and people from various sectors. Your comments have resonated with many, and you were cited in the Parliamentary Debate on Singapore's strategy to emerge stronger from COVID-19. What is your greatest hope on the impact and change that your book and public contributions will bring about?

We are in a protracted crisis that has affected the lives of many, and it will continue to do so. We each do what we can, and let's all step up to help one another weather through difficult times.

But, both individually and collectively, we need to understand the psychology of how we think, feel, and behave. We need to shore up our psychological defence considerably and now, if we are to have a good chance of Singapore seeing through the COVID-19 crisis. Focus on self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience to build psychological capital. A society with strong psychological capital can defuse an adverse climate and mitigate the impact of negative events and severe crises. It helps prevent negativity and promote positivity. Along with building psychological capital, adopt the 5C principles of being calm, cautious, considerate, caring, and collectivistic to guide our behaviours and make a positive difference. When we do that, we develop robust psychological defence. Then we can be realistically confident that we will defeat our public enemy, the COVID-19, and emerge stronger and better as individuals and as a society.

Finally, I hope all of us will quickly appreciate the importance of humility, learning orientation, and collaboration, in order to work together effectively to get ourselves safely, and sooner, out of the crisis so that we can move forward.

Combating a crisis is sold at major physical and online bookstores. More information about the book can be found on the publisher website: "COMBATING A CRISIS by David Chan" and in the online book talk jointly organized by SMU, World Scientific, and the National Library Board: <https://youtu.be/AptmBxjjk74>.