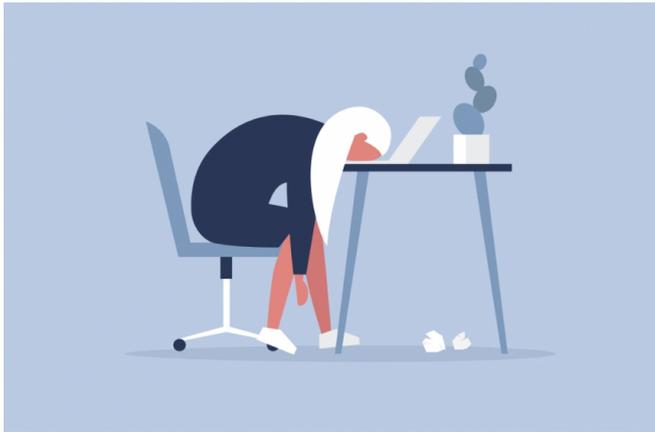


ADVICE

How to Salvage a Disastrous Day in Your Covid-19 Quarantine

By *Aisha S. Ahmad* | APRIL 20, 2020



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Most of us have completed a full month of physical distancing, working and teaching from home in the wake of Covid-19. As we settle into this new reality, many of my colleagues are questioning whether they are faring better or worse by this stage. Some are excitedly doing yoga, baking bread, and writing papers. Others have hit a wall and are crying into a bag of potato chips.

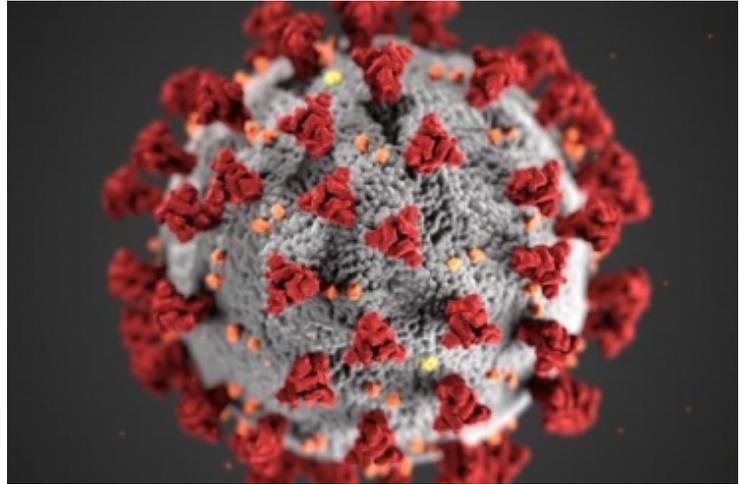
A month into it, are we "improving" or "failing" at crisis adaptation?

Having lived and worked under sustained disaster conditions in many places, I can assure you that that question is ridiculous. Crisis adaptation is not a linear, upward trajectory toward productivity and happiness. In fact, measuring your adaptation success by those metrics can leave you discouraged and stuck. That is especially true if you had a string of "good days" early in the crisis, then got hit with a series of train wrecks.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- [Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall](#)
- [We're Tracking Employees Laid Off or Furloughed by Colleges](#)
- [Why One Former Campus Leader Thinks College Rankings Should Stop During the Pandemic](#)



In the midst of this catastrophe, you may experience disruptions of your sleep, appetite, work, fitness, and family life. Some days, you will wake up in a fog. You will wander around in your pajamas, and when you look up from your phone, it will be 3 p.m. You'll have accomplished nothing and have missed your breakfast and lunch. Work and family commitments will be clawing at you, and you may start to panic.

Take heart. It is absolutely possible to salvage a disastrous day, even if you are in a crippling multiday slump. It is inevitable that everyone will have both good and bad days over the course of this pandemic, and it is absurd to compare the peaks and troughs. The sensible approach is to ride the wave, and work cooperatively with the psychological challenges that each day presents.

In my experience, successful crisis adaptation requires a flexible approach that allows you to reboot and reimagine your process in real time. For newcomers to crisis living, I'll share some of my strategies here that may be of benefit. To make this practical, let's start with that 3 p.m. rock bottom and conduct a rescue operation (Note: If you have small children in your care or other vulnerable people, this rescue operation is far more difficult; just take one day at a time).

Restart your day. When more than half the day has evaporated, it can feel impossible to get back on track. But at this critical moment, your feelings should not dictate your life. Rather, now is the time to take small, concrete actions that will get you unstuck

and save your day.

First, turn off all of your devices and screens. No news. No cellphones. Nothing. Take the next 10 or 20 minutes to shower, change, and scramble an egg. It does not matter how you feel. Put one foot in front of the other. Your feelings will follow your actions. Just do it.

Next, identify easy domestic tasks that will improve your immediate physical environment: Put a load of laundry into the washer, vacuum a room, wash the dishes. Pick one chore and move. Do it for 20 minutes. By 3:45 p.m., your day will already be different. Keep those screens off.

Once you have made a solid restart to your day, you can turn to your seemingly daunting to-do list. Tackling that list will require finesse and humility. If you had planned to launch an ambitious new theoretical project today, scratch it. Bump such projects until tomorrow.

Instead, pick a handful of tasks that are important but fairly quick and simple to achieve. Look for the easy, outstanding work that requires minimal brainpower. Everyone has letters and reviews to write, outlines to draft, and administration to clear away. This is a great day for tedious tasks. Pick clean that low-hanging fruit.

Your to-do list also may have included personal care that slipped away in the first half of your day. Did you watch *Judge Judy* reruns instead of taking your Zoom yoga class? Did you miss the sunshine for your socially distant walk, and now it's raining? We can salvage this. Do a "lite" version of those tasks: Find a 10-minute yoga video on YouTube, then open a window or get an umbrella and walk around the block. Count those as two wins.

The critical point here: Don't aim for perfection. The goal is to end the slump and re-establish stability. Your job for the rest of today is to take small, discrete actions to help you get unstuck.

You are in "remedial" life class. For scholars and other high-achieving professionals, performance is an important part of our identities. We are used to tackling hard challenges, and we thrive on achievement and excellence. But that approach will not help you fix a hot mess of a day. This sort of day needs a different perspective.

As academics, we are accustomed to being advanced learners. But today you are in the "remedial" life class, where the learning objectives are basic physical care, responsible communication, and simple organizational tasks. Today you get an A-plus if you eat two or three proper meals, do any light form of exercise, are compassionate to your loved ones, and complete at least one basic work task.

The objective here is to get your wheels turning. If you started off terribly, but you meet 60 to 70 percent of your remedial life goals by the end of day, then you are actually out of the woods. This is a huge win, and your brain will be in a much better position tomorrow. It is also possible that once your wheels start to turn, you will want to pick up a more challenging task that you had scratched off your to-do list as too ambitious for this particular day. Resist that urge, and stick to the humbler plan.

In my experience, this strategy yields higher overall productivity, especially under chronic crisis conditions. I have used this mental technique for more than a decade, and it has been an integral part of my success as a security scholar. I choose the "remedial life class" whenever I need it. At no point has it undermined my ability to produce award-winning research and teaching. If anything, it has improved my batting average.

Bookend your day. As your workday gets back on track, it is absolutely essential that you control its length. Just because you started at 3:30 p.m. does not mean you should push your workday into the midnight hours. Even if your salvage operation has sparked a burst of productivity, it is wiser to step off the roller coaster by early evening. Don't try to make up for lost time.

The goal is to get back on track for tomorrow and the days ahead. That means that you are completely done before sunset — devices off, documents filed, desk tidy.

Finish with a modest list of goals for tomorrow. Keep your expectations reasonable, in case you need to reboot again tomorrow. As you are exiting a mental and emotional slump, you will fare better with a few psychological wins in a row. So don't create a to-do list that sets you up to feel like a failure. You do not need to run 10 kilometers and write an 8,000-word paper to redeem yourself. Overkill will only land you back in a slump, when what you need now is confidence and momentum.

Finally, the best thing you can do with a disastrous day is end it gracefully — with a positive, affirming action. Make a donation to your food bank, call your friend who is a frontline worker, and offer to be of service. Set aside all of your harsh judgments about your day's performance. Laugh at yourself with your loved ones. Give yourself a spiritual gold star for embracing imperfection. Eat a vegetable. Have some tea. Write a gratitude list. And ... scene.

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