

Crisis from a cognitive perspective

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From the perspective of cognitive science, the central question concerning crises is: What happens in our minds when we face a crisis? The brief answer is that we experience a *loss of control*. This means that we experience a lack of power: We do not know how to act to get out of the problematic situation. There are individual crises such as severe illness or poverty, but also social crises—recently, the climate crisis and the corona pandemic are prime examples. A crisis is, of course, not just a cognitive phenomenon but it is also emotional. Experiencing a loss of control leads to strong stress reactions.

In crises, people are often not able to handle the situation by themselves, so they look for other strategies. Some turn to religion, hoping that a god will act to stop the crisis. Some blame the government, claiming that it has the potential to stop the crisis, but is acting in the wrong way. Some believe in charlatans who promise quick fixes. Some support conspiracy theories (social media makes this strategy more accessible). Some avoid the problem of lack of control by denying the crisis (a recent president of the US is an example). Those who fail to find a strategy they believe can mitigate the crisis become depressed. Some few persons become creative and work to invent new ways to solve the crisis.

In early stages of a crisis, social panic reactions are common. Doing something is seen as better than doing nothing. Many people look at what others are doing, for example hoarding toilet paper, which leads to more hoarding. Such communitarian experiences are comforting and they give a false feeling of control, but they do not solve the crisis.

Not very long ago, crises were ubiquitous. We were ridden by the four horsemen of the apocalypse—death, war, famine and pestilence. Crises were parts of ordinary life. Since a little more than a century, we have become spoiled, at least in the Western world. When I am ill, I go to the doctor and expect to be cured. When there is fire in my house, I call the fire brigade. When I have no money, I expect the community to provide food and shelter for me. Being spoiled, we are disappointed when no immediate solution is available. We blame governments and other authorities for failing in the corona pandemic and the climate crisis.

Advances in medicine and technology have given us the impression that humans can control everything. Following the historian Yuval Harari, we have become *Homo Deus*—we believe we are gods who can solve all problems. In the case of the corona pandemic, this may very well be what happens. Creative people within medical technology are producing different forms of vaccines that will eventually take us out of the crisis. But when it comes to the climate crisis,

the situation is bleaker. There is no unique solution to the problems and they require extensive and coordinated political manoeuvres.

There are, however, not only social crises, but also individual. The individualization of modernity has generated demands on a person to 'work' with herself—to construe her own identity, even her own 'brand'—by controlling her body and her mind. Technologies such as photography and social media have provided tools for exposing the constructed individual. These technologies together with the advertising industry drive up our expectations of what a successful life consists in. We expect to be omnipotent in relation to ourselves, but this is, of course, a cognitive illusion. As a consequence, when the construction fails—when one cannot exert sufficient control in relation to the ideal picture of oneself—one ends up in a personal crisis. Hence, modernity has resulted in new types of individual crises that did not exist earlier.