

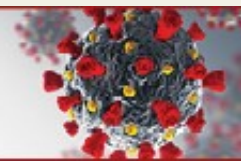
APS Backgrounder Series: Psychological Science and COVID-19: Remaining Resilient During a Pandemic

March 30, 2020



Human behavior is one of the most important factors dictating the severity of pandemics for both the spread of the disease and the psychological impacts it triggers, such as anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty. Through an ongoing series of backgrounders, the Association for Psychological Science (APS) is exploring many of the psychological factors that can help the public understand and collectively combat the spread of COVID-19. Each backgrounder features the assessments, research, and recommendations of a renowned subject expert in the field of psychological science. This content has not undergone separate peer review and is provided as a service to the public during this time of pandemic.

**Visit APS's main COVID-19 page for more
psychological science research and insights.**



Expert commentary from APS Fellow [George A. Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University](#), who is responsible for introducing the idea of resilience to the study of loss and trauma. He is known as a pioneering researcher in the field of bereavement and trauma.

A PDF of this material can be downloaded [here](#).

What does psychological science say about the human quality of resilience?

Resilience is one of many possible outcomes to life challenges. We consider people to be resilient when they are able to maintain stable mental health despite being exposed to a serious stressor. This resilience to stress can be part of a person's intrinsic nature, but it can also come from external factors, including support groups and social resources.

How does resilience relate to epidemics?

Generally, in the case of an epidemic, resilience is about dealing with the ongoing stress and distress in order to keep them at a minimum during a time of crisis. This is especially true for people who fall ill. In these cases, resilience is being able to maintain a trajectory of good mental health—keeping spirits up and minimizing depression, worry, and anxiety.

How does resilience relate specifically to COVID-19, considering the course of events to date?

As our nation and the world deal with COVID-19, the key psychological objective for most people is to keep stress at a minimum. Everyone is adapting to the new reality, which includes the fear of viral spread and contagion, self-quarantine, and supply shortages. More seriously, some are coping with illness and fear of death. To overcome the stresses of these situations and remain resilient throughout, it is important to use the tools we already have at our disposal, including:

- Staying optimistic
- Relying on the support of others
- Bonding with those close to us
- Keeping informed but not overindulging in media consumption
- Distracting oneself
- Finding ways to laugh and have fun through things like watching movies and reading
- Most especially, finding ways to minimize isolation with joint family activities, and keeping in touch with friends and colleagues by phone, video, email.

People should understand that there is no magic bullet. Research has shown that no single factor determines resilience for a population. It is therefore up to each person to try different ways to cope to see what works best for them.

What are the most relevant psychological science findings the public should know and understand?

1. We can cope with this. My research (and the research of others) has shown repeatedly that the majority of humans cope well and are resilient to just about any adversity.
2. There is no single best way to cope for everyone. Often, we see popular articles about the 3 or 5 or 7 keys to resilience. Research has shown many different factors predict resilience, but the effects of all of these factors are small because they don't always work or they don't work for everyone.
3. Research also shows that we need to be flexible and adapt. This means paying attention to what is happening to us and being nimble so we can adjust to what the situation is calling for. Each person should try different ways of coping and adapting to see what works best for them.

What is the one message people should know that psychological science teaches us?

This is not easy, but we can do it. Human beings have shown abundant psychological resilience in the face of just about any adversity imaginable.

Are there any published articles that are particularly insightful on these topics?

Bonanno, G. A., Brewin, C. R., Kaniasty, K., & La Greca, A. M. (2010). Weighing the costs of disaster: Consequences, risks, and resilience in individuals, families, and communities. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 11(1), 1–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100610387086>

Bonanno, G. A., Westphal, M., & Mancini, A. D. (2011). Resilience to loss and potential trauma. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 7, 511–535. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032210-104526>

Bonanno, G. A., Ho, S. A. Y. M. Y., Chan, J. C. K., Kwong, R. S. Y., Cheung, C. K. Y., Wong, C. P. Y., & Wong, V. C. W. (2008). Psychological resilience and dysfunction among hospitalized survivors of the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong: A latent class approach. *Health Psychology*, 27(5), 659–667. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.27.5.659>

Bonanno, G. A., & Burton, C. L. (2013). Regulatory Flexibility: An Individual Differences Perspective on Coping and Emotion Regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 591–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613504116>

Galatzer-Levy, I. R., Huang, S. H., & Bonanno, G. A. (2018). Trajectories of resilience and dysfunction following potential trauma: A review and statistical evaluation. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 63, 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2018.05.008>

APS is the leading international organization dedicated to advancing scientific psychology across disciplinary and geographic borders. Our members study some of life's biggest questions and help solve some of society's most difficult problems. More than 35,000 leading psychological scientists, academics, clinicians, researchers, educators, administrators, and students from more than 80 countries are APS. Led by a drive to better understand and improve the human

condition, our members study all facets of behavior, from neurons to neighborhoods. Further, a key part of APS's mission is to promote the integration of the full range of scientific perspectives across our diverse field, and with other scientific disciplines.