

The Business Brain

Catastrophic loss, and the resilience of the human psyche

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Although Japan has suffered a catastrophic triple whammy – earthquake, tsunami, nuclear crisis – financial analysts predict that its economy will rebound, and sooner than we may expect. “Despite the terrifying destruction and the horrific human toll, the long-term impact of the quake on the Japanese economy could be surprisingly small,” James Surowiecki wrote in this week’s *New Yorker*. “Will people buy one less iPad because of the earthquake?” Arthur Heinmaa, managing partner of Toron Investment Management, said in a recent *Globe and Mail* interview. “I don’t think so.”

If a brisk recovery from a minimum of \$300-billion in losses seems an exercise in magical thinking, what about the psychological recovery of a population facing unspeakable hardship? It’s hard to imagine bouncing back from the sudden loss of family members – not to mention forfeiting confidence in your food supplies or financial security – and simply suiting up for work in the high-tech, pharmaceutical or automotive industries within a month of such disaster.

Yet that is exactly what is likely to happen with about 90 per cent of those exposed to the Japanese crises, according to George Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University and author of *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*.

Most people are incredibly resilient to unforeseen losses, which is all for the good, he says, explaining that our toughness is a byproduct of human evolution over millennia of uncertainties – about predators, about food, and the vicissitudes of the environment. “Though it’s very common to read that after facing a disaster entire communities have PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], a lot of what people read is anecdotal,” he said.

While anecdotes are perfect ways to transmit the human dimension of catastrophes, they’re hardly scientifically sound ways to measure their impact. An exhaustive review of the research literature by Professor Bonanno and two colleagues (Maren Westphal of Columbia, and Anthony Mancini of Pace University), published last November, shows that although individuals vary in their reactions to natural disasters, resilience is the human norm.

The evidence may seem counterintuitive but it’s incontrovertible. Disasters cause serious, long-standing harm in a minority of people – almost never more than 30 per cent, Prof. Bonanno said. The person’s age, gender, health, income and social connectedness all affect how resilient he or she will be. “Being female puts you slightly more at risk,” he noted, “while being older makes you slightly more resilient.” As one of the greyest societies in the world, many Japanese senior citizens have already experienced huge losses (some of them in previous quakes, others in Hiroshima or Nagasaki) and have seen their community rebound. Indeed, recent research evidence suggests that exposure to such hardship inoculates people against despair if similar crises recur.

How close you are to the scene of destruction is key. “Super, super exposure” makes you more vulnerable, Prof. Bonanno said. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, “the PTSD rate in the New York area in the first six months was about 6 per cent. Among those who saw the attack personally, that rate rose to 12 per cent; and among those who had direct exposure – who were in the towers and got out – that rate rose to 25 per cent.”

In our close-knit global business communities, many Canadians have colleagues or industry connections in Japan. So what can employers or colleagues do right now to provide support? “Debriefing isn’t possible,” Prof. Bonanno said, referring to the overwhelming evidence that trauma prevention programs (such as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing) have not only been proven ineffective, they can be harmful. One 2009 study found that those who were “debriefed” after a disaster were worse off, psychologically, than those in the control group.

In any case, it’s too early to provide psychological support to the victims in Japan, he said. People need food, water, and concrete, organizational assistance to help find their loved ones. But if there’s one thing he learned after working with 9/11 survivors, it’s that it is fine to be upbeat: “People want to have a normal relationship with others, even in the worst of times.” So if you’re interacting with colleagues who work in Japan, “it’s okay to smile and laugh after the event. The crux is that people will be okay and the sun will rise again.”

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

