

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure

By Aisha S. Ahmad MARCH 27, 2020

Among my academic colleagues and friends, I have observed a common response to the continuing Covid-19 crisis. They are fighting valiantly for a sense of normalcy — hustling to move courses online, maintaining strict writing schedules, creating Montessori schools at their kitchen tables. They hope to buckle down for a short stint until things get back to normal. I wish anyone who pursues that path the very best of luck and health.

Yet as someone who has experience with crises around the world, what I see behind this scramble for productivity is a perilous assumption. The answer to the question everyone is asking — "When will this be over?" — is simple and obvious, yet terribly hard to accept. The answer is *never*.

Global catastrophes change the world, and this pandemic is very much akin to a major war. Even if we contain the Covid-19 crisis within a few months, the legacy of this pandemic will live with us for years, perhaps decades to come. It will change the way we move, build, learn, and connect. There is simply no way that our lives will resume as if this had never happened. And so, while it may feel good in the moment, it is foolish to dive into a frenzy of activity or obsess about your scholarly productivity right now. That is denial and delusion. The emotionally and spiritually sane response is to prepare to be forever changed.

The rest of this piece is an offering. I have been asked by my colleagues around the world to share my experiences of adapting to conditions of crisis. Of course, I am just a human, struggling like everyone else to adjust to the pandemic. However, I have worked and lived under conditions of war, violent conflict, poverty, and disaster in many places around the world. I have experienced food shortages and disease outbreaks, as well as long periods of social isolation, restricted movement, and confinement. I have conducted award-winning research under intensely difficult physical and psychological conditions, and I celebrate productivity and performance in my own scholarly career.

I share the following thoughts during this difficult time in the hope that they will help other academics to adapt to hardship conditions. Take what you need, and leave the rest.

### **Stage No. 1: Security**

Your first few days and weeks in a crisis are crucial, and you should make ample room to allow for a mental adjustment. It is perfectly normal and appropriate to feel bad and lost during this initial transition. Consider it a good thing that you are not in denial, and that you are allowing yourself to work through the anxiety. No sane person feels good during a global disaster, so be grateful for the discomfort of your sanity. At this stage, I would focus on food, family, friends, and maybe fitness. (You will not become an Olympic athlete in the next two weeks, so don't put ridiculous expectations on your body.)

Next ignore everyone who is posting productivity porn on social media right now. It is OK that you keep waking up at 3 a.m. It is OK that you forgot to eat lunch and cannot do a Zoom yoga class. It is OK that you have not touched that revise-and-resubmit in three weeks.

Ignore the people who are posting that they are writing papers and the people who are complaining that they cannot write papers. They are on their own journey. Cut out the noise.

Know that you are not failing. Let go of all of the profoundly daft ideas you have about what you *should* be doing right now. Instead, focus intensely on your physical and psychological security. Your first priority during this early period should be securing your home. Get sensible essentials for your pantry, clean your house, and make a coordinated family plan. Have reasonable conversations with your loved ones about emergency preparedness. If you have a loved one who is an emergency worker or essential worker, redirect your energies and support that person as your top priority. Identify their needs, and then meet those needs.

No matter what your family unit looks like, you will need a team in the weeks and months ahead. Devise a strategy for social connectedness with a small group of family, friends, and/or neighbors, while maintaining physical distancing in accordance with public-health guidelines. Identify the vulnerable and make sure they are included and protected.

The best way to build a team is to be a good teammate, so take some initiative to ensure that you are not alone. If you do not put this psychological infrastructure in place, the challenge of necessary physical-distancing measures will be crushing. Build a sustainable and safe social system now.

## **Stage No. 2: The Mental Shift**

Once you have secured yourself and your team, you will feel more stable, your mind and body will adjust, and you will crave challenges that are more demanding. Given time, your brain can and will reset to new crisis conditions, and your ability to do higher-level work will resume.

This mental shift will make it possible for you to return to being a high-performance scholar, even under extreme conditions. However, do not rush or prejudge your mental shift, especially if you have never experienced a disaster before. One of [the most relevant posts I saw](#) on Twitter (by writer Troy Johnson) was: "Day 1 of Quarantine: 'I'm going to meditate and do body-weight training.' Day 4: \*just pours the ice cream into the pasta\*" — it's funny but it also speaks directly to the issue.

Now more than ever, we must abandon the performative and embrace the authentic. Our essential mental shifts require humility and patience. Focus on real internal change. These human transformations will be honest, raw, ugly, hopeful, frustrated, beautiful, and divine. And they will be slower than keener academics are used to. Be slow. Let this distract you. Let it change how you think and how you see the world. Because the world is our work. And so, may this tragedy tear down all our faulty assumptions and give us the courage of bold new ideas.

## **Stage No. 3: Embrace a New Normal**

On the other side of this shift, your wonderful, creative, resilient brain will be waiting for you. When your foundations are strong, build a weekly schedule that prioritizes the security of your home team, and then carve out time blocks for different categories of your work: teaching, administration, and research. Do the easy tasks first and work your way into the heavy lifting. Wake up early. The online yoga and crossfit will be easier at this stage.

Things will start to feel more natural. The work will also make more sense, and you will be more comfortable about changing or undoing what is already in motion. New ideas will emerge that would not have come to mind had you stayed in denial. Continue to embrace your mental shift. Have faith in the process. Support your team.

Understand that this is a marathon. If you sprint at the beginning, you will vomit on your shoes by the end of the month. Emotionally prepare for this crisis to continue for 12 to 18 months, followed by a slow recovery. If it ends sooner, be pleasantly surprised. Right now, work toward establishing your serenity, productivity, and wellness under sustained disaster conditions.

None of us knows how long this crisis will last. We all want our troops to be home before Christmas. The uncertainty is driving us all mad.

Of course, there will be a day when the pandemic is over. We will hug our neighbors and our friends. We will return to our classrooms and coffee shops. Our borders will eventually reopen to freer movement. Our economies will one day recover from the forthcoming recessions.

Yet we are just at the beginning of that journey. For most people, our minds have not come to terms with the fact that the world has already changed. Some faculty members are feeling distracted and guilty for not being able to write enough or teach online courses properly. Others are using their time at home to write and report a burst of research productivity. All of that is noise — denial and delusion. And right now, denial only serves to delay the essential process of acceptance, which will allow us to reimagine ourselves in this new reality.

On the other side of this journey of acceptance are hope and resilience. We will know that we can do this, even if our struggles continue for years. We will be creative and responsive, and will find light in all the nooks and crannies. We will learn new recipes and make unusual friends. We will have projects we cannot imagine today, and will inspire students we have not yet met. And we will help each other. No matter what happens next, together, we will be blessed and ready to serve.

In closing, I give thanks to those colleagues and friends who hail from hard places, who know this feeling of disaster in their bones. In the past few days, we have laughed about our childhood wounds and have exulted in our tribulations. We have given thanks and tapped into the resilience of our old wartime wounds. Thank you for being warriors of the light and for sharing your wisdom born of suffering. Because calamity is a great teacher.

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