

Turning Outside Chaos into Inside Calm

How can I better cope with a chaotic world?

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The Challenge

It's hard to pick up a newspaper or listen to a news broadcast recently without being overwhelmed by "gloom and doom". The 24-hour cable news cycle and always-on internet do not help either. Every day we learn about the thousands of people who are coping with either natural or man-made disasters; for example the latest flood, hurricane, political upheaval, unemployment statistics, home foreclosures, and "401K-O".

There are even TV series that pander to this disaster mentality by emphasizing the potential for future chaos, such as when the Yellowstone Park super volcano will erupt, New York City will be pounded by a massive hurricane or Oklahoma City hit by a massive tornado, or ... a massive meteor will simply destroy all life as we know it. Disaster planning is a noble **profession**, but is it **entertainment**?

The fear of being on the verge of an apocalyptic disaster can definitely spoil your day! It can quickly erode your common sense, rational sensibility, strong determination, self-confidence and high energy level. You could start to develop a **situational depression** that becomes hardened into a **general depression** over time. Depression can lead to emotional, mental, physical and spiritual paralysis; you are unable to think clearly and do anything at all. You grind your teeth, fidget constantly, consume bottles of antacid and have a constant sense of doom ...

Choosing to be a creature buffeted by every local and national crisis rather than a creator of a new day only perpetuates our:

1. Clouded perception – In times of chaos it is natural to think the worst and negatively compare ourselves with others we hardly know like celebrities, government officials and people we don't think are hurting as much as we are. Actually, thinking about people who are in worse shape than us can lift our spirits and give us a sense of gratitude. When our perceptions are clouded by chaos we develop a doomsday approach and dismiss the idea that anything positive can come from the tumult.

2. Floppy baseline – Uncertain times have a way of tripping us up and upsetting our fundamental rhythms. Thus, we forget to eat healthy, sleep restfully and exercise moderately. Our priorities go out the window and our health, nutrition, fitness take a back seat. We prefer to just shut down and act like nothing we do matters.
3. Fatigue – Staying with a mentality of chaos is akin to being stuck. When we are stuck, we tend to pull away from others that can help us find inner strength. Being stuck feeds on being an emotion driven creature and leads to chronic overtiredness.

The Solution

In reality, disasters are not uncommon.

Financial Disasters: Since our first President we have had at least 13 major financial crises in this country, including the “Great Depression” and both the Vietnam and Iraq wars have been controversial and severe financial and social drains on our resources.

Man-Made Disasters: Before the “911” terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, New Yorkers were thought of as people with intense, abrupt and aloof personae. After 911, survivors including emergency personnel were reported to have become more personable, at ease and reverent. Commentators said that the devastation forced New Yorkers to look at what else could have happen, how much was lost and how many people teamed up to provide them with aid. In turn they became more open, grateful and giving.

Natural Disasters: Mother Nature is not so sweet: there are several large hurricanes, tornados and major floods **each season** (Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst), and large earthquakes occur every few years in California and elsewhere.

Disasters are “natural”; stay centered!

So, on the one hand we have to accept that disasters are **part of life on earth**; on the other hand we have to deal with both the irrational pandering by the media to the disaster mentality, and face our own irrational fear of disaster. We fear disasters because disasters are (perceived to be) beyond our control. Yet some people are able to remain in control during chaotic situations.

The recent emergency landing of a USAir flight on the Hudson River in New York is a great example of dealing with a chaotic emergency. The emergency was sudden (they hit a flock of birds while climbing just after takeoff, losing power to both engines), they had to respond within seconds (limited options for landing quickly ruled out because they were gliding and not flying) landing the plane on water without serious injury (while

avoiding the George Washington Bridge), and the land and water based emergency response with swift and effective, plucking all crew and passengers from the icy river.

But Captain Sullenberger and his airplane crew, and the land and water based rescue ships, did not allow the disaster to overwhelm them ... they stayed centered and calm and dealt rationally with the issues.

Coping means understanding that we cannot avoid external disasters, but we must not become overwhelmed while dealing with them.

We must develop skills to remain calm on the inside, to have the confidence that we can survive, to learn from our experiences and to move forward.

We build internal calm in the face of external chaos by practicing what we are good at when we are *not* facing chaos, by building our self-confidence slowly over time, so that we can act responsibly and effectively as “second nature”.