



We will bounce back

MY NEAMAN Institute colleague Dr. Reuven Gal is eminently qualified to help me answer the key question how will we Israelis bounce back?

Dr. Gal is a social and clinical psychologist, formerly Chief Psychologist of the IDF and Deputy National Security Advisor for Domestic Policy at the National Security Council. Gal has published several excellent research papers on social resilience. Four years ago, he and I chaired a workshop in Beijing, China, on “Strengthening Social Resilience: Perspectives from Israel and China.”

Let us begin with what we mean by “bouncing back.” Individual resilience is a person’s strength and coping behaviors that sustain him or her during disasters or stressful life events (like COVID-19). Resilient persons allow themselves to “bend” or change somewhat from their routines during hard times – and then to bounce back to their original state when the hard times end. Social resilience is the same idea, applied to the community, neighborhood, city and nation. It is the capacity of a society to prepare itself, to contain and manage major national crises, and to bounce back expeditiously to an enhanced functioning.

All nations are today undergoing extreme stress. In the past, Israel has had more than its share and has had a lot of practice in social resilience. But it has never encountered a pandemic.

Will we measure up?

I interviewed Dr. Gal digitally.

Dr. Gal, you did path-breaking research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among soldiers who fought in the Yom Kippur War. You found that tank crews, which fought as an organic team (i.e., trained together, knew each other well over time, and in reserves), had far less PTSD later than tank crews thrown together quickly and randomly, with members who did not previously know each other.

This suggests that social resilience is in part a function of our social network, social support.

GOLANTAMIR



Dr. Reuven Gal, a social and clinical psychologist who served as chief psychologist of the IDF and deputy national security advisor for domestic policy at the National Security Council

In these days of virus, we are asked to engage in social isolation. (My wife Dr. Sharona Maital prefers to call it “spatial separation” or “stay connected, stay apart”).

How can we maintain our social support systems, so crucial in remaining resilient, when we are asked to isolate, with increasing severity?

Social interaction, indeed, is crucial in times of crises. And Sharona is right: It is a spatial separation – since the social interactions are flourishing these days, more than ever.

Look at the flood of social media that’s taking place now, 24/7. In fact, the need for social interaction now is doubled: both the fear (of the pandemic) and the separation.

The comparison to the soldiers in the Yom Kippur War is not completely valid – first, since among the tank crews it was the level of trust in their comrades’ efficacy during

critical moments that gave the organic teams the better hand; this is not exactly the case here. Second, the so-called “dependent variable,” namely the PTSD, is not the relevant one in the present situation. Now it is fear, trust in authorities, uncertainty, helplessness – similar, but not at all as critical as combat reaction.

That being said, it is still very true that we need to maintain our social support systems in times like this. They are more unique now, though, under the circumstances. The primary support system under the current conditions is the “small family unit” (parallel to what we call in the military the “small combat unit,” usually referring to a squad or small platoons). It relates to those family members who find themselves isolated together at home.

For many families this is quite an irregular situation – mom and dad at home for the

whole day? Yet this is the framework from which most of the support, reassurance, and questions and answers, etc. will come. Other support systems can be the municipality – Ivria and I were very moved when they called from the Social Welfare department and asked if we needed anything... It was very supportive!

Our circle of friends is another support system, which becomes super important nowadays. And yes, as in periods of war when we see bursts of patriotism and solidarity, such as food stands for soldiers at road intersections, special greeting programs on radio, etc., where it is clear that those “bursts” serve not only the soldiers but even more the public itself, here too, you can see the need for that kind of solidarity, with people coming up with creative ideas of gatherings on balconies, etc. The overt purpose is to praise and thank the health professionals, but the hidden (and unconscious) function is to strengthen solidarity.

If you could do so, what research project would you design during these critical times to explore social resilience? For instance, I did a quick Survey Monkey study, with one question, asking what acts of kindness have you done during this crisis.

We have actually initiated a study already within our group of resilience researchers at the S. Neaman Institute – an ongoing survey with repeated measures, which includes questions regarding the level of fear, sources of information, compliance with instructions, etc.

Dr. Carmit Padan and Dr. Carmit Rapaort, of our Institute, are conducting this survey. From my point of view, the main finding will be not a single-measure picture, but rather looking at and measuring the changes over time. For example, did the fear level change after the first case of death was announced? How did public trust in governmental authorities change as the pandemic evolved, and so on.

To what extent can technology (WhatsApp,

Facebook, Face Time, Zoom, etc.) provide social support in the absence of face-to-face family gatherings?

It sure can and it does! For example, just five minutes ago my two grandchildren, ages 6 and 10, called me on WhatsApp video to interview Saba for their “Ruth & Shaul Podcast Program.” What an accomplishment for such a young age, but also for information technology!

It became a wonderful opportunity not only for me to tell them how much I miss them and love them and to compliment them on their creative way of coping, but no less important – it was an opportunity for them to express their love to me and thus support me in my desperate state of grandkid deprivation... In fact, I believe that for the first time information technology is welcomed (rather than detested) by most parents, as it became a useful and creative tool to engage their kids (and themselves!), not only as a remote-learning substitute for closed schools, but also as a mind-opening opportunity (see “Ruth & Shaul” for example).

There is a fierce trade-off between public health measures (isolation) and measures, which preserve our economy and economic activity and jobs. We are ostensibly heading toward a staggering one million unemployed; half a million have already registered at the unemployment office.

I asked Dr. Gal, if he had any insights on this trade-off – when decisions are made under extreme uncertainty, and economists and public health experts are fiercely divided on it, and when we know that economic distress also creates casualties?

Dr. Gal replied, admirably, that he needed to think more deeply about this.

So do our government experts. We need more big-picture analysis and we need to weigh the consequences of shutting down an entire economy for a very long time. ■

The writer heads the Zvi Griliches Research Data Center at S. Neaman Institute, Technion and blogs at www.timnovate.wordpress.com

My Apology to Technology

Dear Technology, OK – I know. I’ve written many harsh words about you, especially about social media, how they distribute fake news, ruin our trust in experts and in one another, waste our time, destroy face-to-face social contact ... ruinous! And then – the coronavirus. We have organized family WhatsApp gatherings with our kids and grandkids in Los Angeles, New York City, Ra’anana, and Lachish ... Seeing those beautiful faces keeps us healthy. Yesterday we had a regular class with our Rabbi Elisha, with 11 participants, including a Q&A and lively discussion in a Zoom meeting. A whole program of lectures has been organized by our synagogue. I’ve been videotaping lectures (with Zoom) on entrepreneurship and start-ups, and recycling old tapes. These have a new life as everyone is at home and often online. We are counseled to stay together, but stay apart, and the only way to do this safely is through technology. Thank heavens for Outlook Express, Zoom, WhatsApp, Face Time, Facebook ... and, yes, it is hard to say it, but yes, for Twitter. So, sorry, Technology – this is my abject apology. We need you more than ever now. You are coming through for us just when we need you. If we did not have you, it would be hard to bear the isolation, especially for us grandparents and seniors.

Yours truly, Shlomo Maital

From my WordPress blog