

Perils of living in a trauma state

Some analysts say the federal government was shut down because our nation is politically divided. A better explanation might be that we are traumatized. New insights emerge when we consider trauma when examining congressional gridlock and other dysfunctions, including our nation's response to climate disruption.

Relentless cuts in middle-class incomes, terrorist attacks, two wars, the economic collapse of 2008, unemployment, mass shootings and more have left Americans stressed and traumatized. These chronic adversities have overwhelmed our individual and collective coping capacities, leading to a wide array of maladaptive behaviors. We have become a trauma-besieged nation; our politics and much more reflect this.

When humans experience trauma and stress, powerful neurochemicals flood our brains and bodies, putting us in a state of hyperarousal. This is a natural biological reaction that prepares us to defend ourselves against threats by fighting, fleeing or freezing.

Because humans are resilient, most people return to their normal state after a one-time traumatic event. When significant adversity exists over long periods, however, humans can become stuck in a state of hyperarousal. The coping mechanisms that once were helpful become harmful.

Physicians know that constant hyperarousal can lead to high blood pressure, heart attacks, cancer and other maladies.

Research also shows that a state of constant hyperarousal can cloud our judgment with anxiety and fear, making it impossible to think clearly or consider the long-term consequences of our actions. Our thinking becomes simplistic as we try to increase our chances of survival by limiting the options available for action so we can make quick decisions.

In this heightened state of defensiveness, our actions are more likely to become aggressive. We may harm ourselves through alcohol and drug use or overeating. We may physically or emotionally abuse family members, or attack others perceived to be different or outsiders. Extremist thinking becomes exacerbated in people with strong authoritarian personality traits.

Although it is not the only contributor, the behavioral patterns resulting from traumatization have been transferred to the political process as "us-vs.-them" polarization, the demonization of those with different views, and greater fanaticism.

As bad as the federal government shutdown was, even worse is that these patterns have contributed to our nation's inability to meaningfully tackle climate disruption, the greatest threat facing humanity today.

Two recent scientific reports issued urgent warnings about the ecological and human disasters that lie ahead unless the United States and other nations quickly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Neither produced more than a murmur among the general public or elected officials. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued the first warning. It said that human-caused warming is "extremely likely" — which in scientific terms means unequivocal — and that the more greenhouse gases humanity emits, the worse it will get. It also said that a major effort to cut emissions is needed to avoid catastrophic consequences.

The second admonition came from scientists at the University of Hawaii, who said that under current emission levels some cities in the tropics will experience unprecedented temperature increases within only a decade or so. New York City will experience life-altering temperature shifts by 2047. Cities such as Detroit, Los Angeles and Seattle will experience major shifts in climate a short time later.

As with previous scientific warnings, few people altered their activities. Instead, most continued long-term patterns that often mirror trauma-induced behavior. Some people deny reality — what psychologists call “dissociate.” Sometimes egged on by disinformation campaigns, they refuse to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of human-induced climate disruption.

Others engage in what is called “deindividuation,” a state characterized by loss of self-awareness and diminished responsibility for one’s actions. People claim, for instance, that their actions contribute little to the problem, that someone else must solve it, or in other ways deny responsibility for personal actions that harm the climate.

Even many who accept the reality of human-caused climate disruption incessantly repeat problem behaviors through a process psychologists call “reenactment.” Even when they know the effects, for example, they continue to use large amounts of oil, coal and natural gas and consume more energy-intensive goods and services.

History is littered with human tragedies resulting from human reactions to overwhelming repetitive trauma. We must prevent that from happening again by understanding the symptoms and more effectively managing our emotions and behaviors.

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