

Our sense of normalcy bounces back fast: study

July 29 2020



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The coronavirus pandemic brought unprecedented uncertainty and stress. But even amid the turmoil and the new pressures of work-from-home and home-schooling, millions of people were able to keep calm and carry on with the demands of the moment.

Research forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* shows that the human sense of normalcy is capable of bouncing back a lot faster than we might think.

"Our psychological immune system is so effective that even though we have an ongoing, persisting stressor, we start to fix ourselves almost immediately," says management professor Trevor Foulk at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, who authored the research with colleagues from the University of Southern California, Singapore Management University and the University of Florida.

"When a big stressor happens, it knocks us out of our pattern. We feel like we don't have control and we're just not like our normal selves," says Foulk. "We have always tended to think that we'll only get our sense of normalcy back when the stressor goes away." Not true, according to Foulk's latest research.

The study, "Getting Back to the 'New Normal': Autonomy Restoration During a Global Pandemic," shows that psychological recovery can take place even while a person is still in the throes of a stressful experience. That's significant; previous research has suggested that recovery processes start only after stressors abate and can take months or even years to unfold.

In the latest study, researchers surveyed 122 employees several times each day for two weeks to explore how they experienced the pandemic. The study began on March 16, 2020, just as stay-at-home orders and school closures went into effect across U.S. cities and states. It was just days after the World Health Organization's March 11 declaration that COVID-19 had reached pandemic status. The timing meant that researchers had a unique opportunity to study the very early days of the crisis.

The researchers focused on two manifestations of normalcy—specifically powerlessness and authenticity. They found that on the first day of the study, just as the crisis was beginning, employees initially felt very powerless and inauthentic.

"But, over the course of even just those two weeks, normalcy started to return," he says. "People felt less powerless and more authentic—even while their subjective stress levels were rising."

It's an important finding, as it suggests that humans can establish a new normal even while feeling stressed and worried.

Foulk says this shows employees were adjusting to their new situations and the disruptions associated with the crisis and establishing a new way of feeling normal. "The pace at which people felt normal again is remarkable, and highlights how resilient we can be in the face of unprecedented challenges."

The effect was more pronounced for more neurotic individuals—people who tend to be more nervous, anxious, depressed, self-conscious and vulnerable. Those employees had a more extreme initial reaction to the stress, but then recovered at a faster rate. The researchers say this is likely because employees high in neuroticism are better psychologically equipped to navigate stress so they can bounce back from it quicker.

Overall, Foulk says, all employees start to feel normal much faster than most would expect.

"Contrary to a lot of the doom and gloom we're hearing, our work offers a little bit of a ray of hope—that our psychological immune system starts working a lot faster than we think, and that we can start to feel 'normal' even while all of this is going on."

More information: *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000655](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000655)

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Our sense of normalcy bounces back fast: study (2020, July 29) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-normalcy-fast.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.