

From the Cold War to COVID-19: The 8 common ways people behave in a crisis

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A year ago, the world was just starting to learn about a mysterious virus that was killing people in the Chinese city of Wuhan. While the ensuing coronavirus pandemic was unprecedented in current times, human

experience with disasters and crises is obviously not new.

As an academic who teaches disaster management programs, I've studied how people react during different types of disasters. There are common patterns in the ways people come together to respond to these kinds of events —regardless of whether the trigger was a [natural hazard](#), [technologically based](#) or [human-caused](#).

During the Cold War, fears in the U.S. about the breakdown of social order and widespread panic in the event of an atomic bomb attack led to the [study of human behaviors in situations of collective stress](#).

Myths about social breakdowns

[Myths about social breakdown](#) during disasters still prevail and continue to be [used by media to frame](#) societal response to certain types of crises, but the way that people actually respond is primarily [pro-social](#).

When communities are impacted by events that threaten life and safety, the response is typified by the [convergence of people, information and materials](#).

Each of the following eight common types of behaviors associated with [citizen response to past crises and disasters](#) have also been seen during the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) across the globe. The behaviors are not mutually exclusive, but do reflect different motivations.

1. **Helping:** In response to the suffering of others, people reach out to help in [myriad ways](#). Altruistic actions during the pandemic have included the establishment of "[caremongering](#)" and [mutual aid groups](#) to help meet a range of basic needs, including creative initiatives to make [personal protective equipment](#), [hand sanitizer](#) and [ventilators](#). With the pandemic, we all are facing the same

threat, and so people have also [taken action](#) to help reduce the spread of the virus by [wearing masks](#), [social distancing](#) and [working from home where possible](#).

2. **Being anxious:** Anxiety has been [heightened during the pandemic](#) for different reasons. [Visitor restrictions](#) that keep [family members](#) from seeing loved ones in hospitals or residential or long-term care homes, as well as worry about the conditions in care homes, has created anxiety for many. The [use of technology](#) has been critical in helping to re-establish face-to-face or verbal contact between those who have been separated. To address uncertainty and risk, tools were developed to help people decide [if it is safe to visit](#) someone during the pandemic, or if a family member should be taken out of a [retirement](#) or [long-term care home](#).
3. **Evacuating/Returning:** Events that cause physical destruction often result in the evacuation of people from the affected area. While the pandemic did not destroy physical infrastructure in communities, it did [trigger migration](#). People moved to [reduce their risk of exposure](#) to the virus or because of indirect impacts of the pandemic, including university closure and [job or income loss](#). Many of the moves were to be with family in other communities. It is too early to tell how many of those who moved will eventually return.
4. **Supporting:** People often express support and gratitude to those who were part of the formal response effort. [Expressions of support](#) for [health care](#) and other essential workers were evident, particularly in the early months of the pandemic. Forms of support included [banging on pots and pans](#) at a set time each day, [putting signs in windows](#), [lighting landmarks](#) and [highlighting their stories](#). Special thanks were also given to groups such as [as truckers](#) who continued to ensure movement of goods across borders.
5. **Being curious:** People are curious about threats to personal

safety that are outside the realm of their lived experience, with interest being sparked by the novelty of an event and a desire to make sense of the situation. Curiosity about a threat and potential impacts leads to [information-seeking behaviors](#), with the method of getting information being influenced by the proximity to an impact zone. During the early months of the spread of COVID-19, people turned to [the internet](#), as well as traditional and social media, to learn about what was happening in Wuhan—and then Italy and other countries. As the global spread of the virus brought the threat closer to home, people [sought information](#) about what was known about transmission of COVID-19 and preventative actions that could be taken.

6. **Witnessing:** People who witness an event bear testimony to what took place. Sharing of these [kinds of first-hand experiences](#) has been enabled by the ubiquitous use of cell phones and social media. [Citizen witnesses](#) play a unique role when they provide access to sites where traditional media is not present. Citizen journalists [in China](#) took significant risks to share images of the impacts of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan [via YouTube](#). Stories from [doctors](#) and [nurses](#) on the front lines of the response in Italy and other countries provided warnings to others about the impacts of the virus on people and those caring for them. These first-hand accounts allow us to become a second-hand witness to an event, with the rawness of witness testimonies generating an [affective response](#), which then becomes a motive for other actions.
7. **Mourning:** The pandemic has caused a significant loss of life. Restrictions have [limited how people can gather to mourn](#) and [affected the grieving process](#). Attention has been given to finding other ways to mourn. [Public forms of memorialization](#) have included events such as [drive-through candlelight ceremonies](#), as well as place based memorials created using [crosses](#), [flags](#), photos and flowers to represent and honor those who have died. Virtual

memorials have also been created to recognize [health-care workers and citizens](#) who died from COVID-19.

8. **Exploiting:** While most behaviors in disasters and crises are pro-social, there are people who take advantage of a crisis situation for personal gain. Examples of exploiting behaviors early in the pandemic included [hoarding personal protective equipment](#) and [hand sanitizer](#), with the intent of reselling for substantial gain. During the early months of the pandemic, high demand and limited stock or disrupted supply chains led to [exploitive pricing](#) for some products.

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