

# Living well through crisis

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The novel coronavirus has us, as a society and as individuals, asking ourselves some difficult questions. How will we survive this? What are we willing to sacrifice? What comes next.

That so few of us have experienced an event of this magnitude makes it that much harder to put it in context, to know what to do in the day-to-day of social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, and to have faith that we will see something like a return to normal someday. What better time to turn to the hard-won wisdom of a generation that survived the most devastating events of the 20th century and lived to tell the tale.

When Cornell University gerontologist [Karl Pillemer](#) began interviewing the oldest Americans in 2003, he could not have known he would one day be [sharing their advice](#) on living through crises in the midst of a global pandemic. His research, described in his book, [30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans](#), was based on the premise that older people have unique and invaluable knowledge on how to live well through hard times.

The average age of Pillemer's interviewees was 77, with the oldest speaking from 108 years of experience. One thousand of them had lived through the Great Depression, 1200 lived through World War II (WWII), and about 60 respondents had lived through the 1918 Influenza Pandemic that killed an estimated 675,000 people in the United States alone.

He asked them: based on your experience of these world-shaking crises, what advice do you have for younger people on how to live through them? Here is what they said, and the psychological underpinnings of their wise counsel.

## Take the Long View

*Learn that life is good. You have to learn from the problems, or the problems overcome you. I've learned a lot about life, and nothing bothers me anymore. And it gets to be difficult and there are challenges, then it's*

*just the way it is. Acceptance, yes. If you don't accept it, you go down the drain. Be calm, go with the flow. How else can you live?*

-Hannah, 97 at time of interview, lost her entire family in the Holocaust.

One of the most important lessons the elders offered was that this is a finite moment in time, and the present will one day be a memory. The before and after of the COVID-19 pandemic will be different, but the oldest Americans are a testament to the fact that this crisis will end, and recovery and rebuilding will begin.

“I met Holocaust survivors, refugees from many of the early twentieth century’s other major conflicts, and people who lost everything in the Depression,” Pillemer said. “But by the time I sat with them 40, 50, 60, or 70 years after these events occurred, they had built comfortable and often successful and fulfilling lives. Their message was extraordinarily clear: crises occur, societies change, and with resilience we recover and move on.”

Cornell professor emeritus Elaine Wethington is an expert in the study of stress, from major events to daily trials. She explained how taking a long view contributes to the ability to self-regulate negative emotions and manage stress responses.

“This is a lesson you learn over and over when you look at the research,” Wethington said. “Managing your negative emotions by cognitively reappraising what is going on, trying to focus on the future, rather than the things which are distracting you now or making things difficult, is extremely important for coping with stress.”

This lesson also serves as a reminder that however we are getting through this will someday be the story we tell of how we survived. How do we want that story to go?

## **Be Generous**

*There were times when we didn't know if we were going to make it. We not only survived them but we improved on the situations. But we did it together. If one person goes off and thinks he's going to do it by himself, it isn't going to work.*

-Albert, 80, kept his farm through the Great Depression.

A second piece of advice that emerged from these interviews was the importance of being generous in times of crisis.

“Generously assisting other people to the extent that we can is a major way people are able to feel a sense of control,” Pillemer said. “Whether that was helping other people during the Great Depression or assisting the war effort during WWII. Generously helping others is a very good, self-interested strategy.”

Wethington explained this in terms of the concept of solidarity—the sense that we are all in this together—and said that social distancing is in itself a generous act of solidarity.

“You can overcome your own fears for the future by feeling solidarity with others. We are, in a sense, having social interactions of a different kind that are actually really important because these interactions are saying: look it’s important to me that I don’t endanger you.”

## **Don’t worry, prepare**

*Why? I ask myself. What possible difference did it make that I kept my mind on every little thing that might go wrong? When I realized that it made no difference at all, I experienced a freedom that’s hard to describe. My life lesson is this: turn yourself from frittering away the day worrying about what comes next and let everything else that you love and enjoy move in.*

-James, 87.

The oldest Americans have a lot of experience in worrying about an event, going through the event, and dealing with the fallout. According to Pillemer, they overwhelmingly agree: at best worrying wastes time, at worst it increases your suffering.

“The elders found that the best antidote to gnawing worries was taking action,” Pillemer said. “Preparation for the worst doesn’t just make sense for your protection; it also makes you feel empowered. From their experience of crisis, they advise that conscious, rational planning greatly reduces free-floating worry.”

This makes sense, Wethington said, as one of the means of dealing with a stressful situation is to accept that it is happening and focus on the problems at hand that are within our ability to address.

“We as individuals are pretty helpless right now on the larger scale. We can’t stop the virus, but accepting that we’re doing the best that we can—and right now that is avoiding putting other people in danger—helps us to worry less.”

## Small daily pleasures

*I think the most important thing I learned was not to take things for granted. You cannot be entirely prepared for what will happen to you in life, but I learned that despite everything that happened life is worth living and you can enjoy every day, especially because of the little things in life. You can have joy even if the big things go wrong.*

-Ursula, 76, was a child in Germany under the Nazi regime.

The final piece of advice Pillemer shared from the elder interviews was the importance of experiencing joy and savoring small daily pleasures, especially in a time of crisis.

Among the small pleasures mentioned in Pillemer's interviews: "A morning cup of coffee, a warm bed on a winter night, a brightly colored bird feeding on the lawn, an unexpected letter from a friend, even a favorite song on the radio. Paying special attention to these 'microlevel' events forms a fabric of happiness that lifts them up daily. They believe the same can be true for younger people as well."

This last piece of advice is something that is relatively new in psychological research, only around twenty-five years old, and recently gaining ground, Wethington said.

"Filling your life with positive things that make you happy can distract you from your worries and temporarily keep you from sinking into depressed feelings. There's also evidence from research being done in behavior change that feeding people little positive experiences, things that they enjoy on a daily basis, makes it easier for them to manage and do the things they need to do. It's connected not only to how happy you feel in any given hour, it also seems to be connected with how long you live."

Pillemer's research highlights not only the wisdom of a disappearing generation, but the inestimable value of the stories and knowledge of the elders among us. And so, with no small amount of urgency, one final lesson taken from Pillemer's lead: ask your elders your questions while you can and find comfort in their resilience.

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The Legacy Project Blog:

<https://legacyproject.human.cornell.edu/>

Interviews with elders:

[https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9WhqZ0BNas&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ)

[watch?v=j9WhqZ0BNas&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9WhqZ0BNas&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=An\\_mlk90\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=An_mlk90_Jg&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ&index=9)

[Jg&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=An_mlk90_Jg&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ&index=9)

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[HURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ&index=14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mw1i2tmQXzk&list=PUWdHURwln4oBk3RXPSfFZfQ&index=14)