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# RSOG INSIGHT

MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER EDITION

## IN THIS ISSUE

*With the COVID-19 impacting countries at various stages, everyone is trying to understand what is required to protect themselves and their communities.*

*We spoke to some of our friends around the world on how it has affected them and their views of the situation.*

## ABOUT OUR GUEST

Ben Furman is a Finnish psychiatrist, psychotherapist and an internationally renowned teacher of solution-focused therapy, coaching and organisational development.

Ben graduated as a medical doctor (licensed physician) from Helsinki University in 1979. Thereafter he worked for two years as a general practitioner, or primary health care physician in Lapland, northern part of Finland. In 1982 he started his specialization into psychiatry working among other things in outpatient psychiatry, outpatient child psychiatry, liaison psychiatry and different hospital wards. He was accredited his specialist designation in adult psychiatry in 1986. During his specialization he studied psychotherapy, family therapy and brief therapy. He was certified by the accrediting body of the ministry of health as a psychotherapist in 1995 and as a trainer psychotherapist (advanced level specialist psychotherapist) in 2007.

**Disclaimer: Views expressed in the article are of their own and do not reflect the opinion of Razak School of Government.**

## A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF SURVIVAL PSYCHOLOGY BY BEN FURMAN

*In this edition, Ben Furman shares his thoughts on survival psychology based on the impact of COVID-19. He outlined eight factors that can help one to cope in difficult times. Ben Furman spoke at Razak School of Government in 2012 on a topic entitled "[Acquiring Solution-Focused Leadership Skills](#)".*

The COVID-19 time, not unlike any other challenging time, requires us to remind ourselves of the human capacity to thrive, to cope, and to show resilience in the face of adversity.

This is a topic that has interested me for years. When as a young physician I started to specialise in psychiatry, the dominant theory that our teachers taught us was psychoanalysis. This is a psychological theory that emphasises vulnerability and proposes that most of our psychological problems can be traced back to traumatic, or challenging, experiences of our childhood. I was not convinced of this doctrine and decided to look for another, more useful approach, to understanding human psychology.

In the late 80's I had made enough progress in my search to publish a book that represented quite a different view of humans. The name of the book was "It's never too late to have a happy childhood". It was an analysis of hundreds of letters that I had received from people. I had been interviewed in one of our major newspapers and in that interview, I asked readers to write me a letter if they, despite a difficult childhood, were happy as adults. I specifically asked them to describe to me their difficult childhood experiences and to answer the question: "What helped you to thrive against the odds?"



So, what is it that makes us strong? What is it that makes philosophers come up with sayings such as “Men are not disturbed by things but by the view which they take on them” (Epictetus) or “If it doesn’t kill me, it makes me stronger” (Nietzsche)?

Based on what I had learned from the letters that I had received and my subsequent research into the fascinating field of human resilience, I have been able to identify various factors that seem to play a pivotal role in coping and survival. I have listed what I consider the most important ones below:

1. *The tendency to foresee a better future ahead*

Optimism and hope are crucial for survival. The ability to dream, to imagine – sometimes unrealistically so – that our suffering will soon end and something good will come our way, seems to be hardwired into the brain. Some people may be born more optimistic than others, but we all seem to benefit from deliberately thinking along the lines of “When this ordeal will be over I will...” “When this torture ends, I’m going to...” “When the suffering is over, I will enjoy ...”

2. *Allowing others to help us*

Homo homini lupus – a man a wolf to another man – is an old Latin expression that makes the point that humans can at times act horribly towards each other. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. At times of trouble, people have the tendency to become truly altruistic. They actively support and help each other, and by allowing others to help us we can cultivate the feeling of gratitude, which is known to be a potent healing emotion.

3. *Helping others*

Research has shown that human beings cope better with adversity if they, during their ordeal, focus on helping others instead of focusing on their own suffering. For example, parents often focus on helping their children, children may focus on helping their younger siblings, rescue staff on helping citizens, and so on. By helping others, individuals can reduce their own vulnerability and protect themselves from traumatization.

4. *Humour*

A less appreciated but nevertheless an important factor of coping is humour. There is nothing so horrible that we cannot find something to laugh about to reduce our fear and anxiety. There is an abundance of jokes and anecdotes related to COVID-19 on the internet. Stand-up comedians do not hesitate to help us put things into perspective. Even people on their death bed are known to have said something funny to relieve anxiety and assist their survivors in coping.

5. *Growth*

Most religions of the world feature the belief that suffering does not happen in vain, that painful experiences are ordeals that force us to learn, gain knowledge and to become better human beings. I doubt that this is always the case, but it is surely a useful belief to have. It helps us to think that your suffering does not only bring about pain but that it will also have some positive consequences.

6. *Imagination*

“How did you survive?” I once asked a patient of mine who had told me about her difficult childhood experience. Her mother was an alcoholic and when she had been drinking she often locked her daughter in a dark cupboard for long periods of time. “I had imaginary friends in the cupboard”, my patient explained, “and I played with them in the dark until my mother let me out.” Where would we be without our extraordinary ability to use our imagination to cope with adversity? Imagination is a blessing that can do wonders when reality does not offer much hope or protection.



7. *Remembering previous successes*

In the midst of adversity, we can shift our focus from present to the past and remind ourselves of various past hardships that we have coped with and survived. “We have been through worse situations before”, are soothing words that raise hope and help us to remember the means that we have used before in our lives to deal with hardships.

8. *Paying attention to progress*

Getting through ordeals is a journey and it can be helpful for us to realise that we are already well on the way. “What have you done so far to manage the situation?” is a question that helps us become aware of solutions that we have already come up with and employed in dealing with the stressful situation.

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Human beings have a built-in competence to deal successfully with hardship. We have a bucket full of means that we know how to use in times of trouble, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded, from time to time, of those the means what we intuitively know to use.

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## PAST EDITIONS

