Editorial

Embracing the VUCA Response to Overcome the Mental Health Challenges of the VUCA World

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"When nothing is sure, everything is possible."
-Margaret Drabble, The Middle Ground, 1980

THE BURDEN OF COVID-19

Globally, millions of people face the burden of physical and mental stresses caused by COVID-19. Prolonged isolation brought about by protracted quarantine periods, financial losses due to unemployment, disruptions in work, academic and family life balance preclude the resumption to normalcy (Kissler et al., 2020). As in all things that affect the social determinants of health, the poor and older people are marginalized and the most at risk. Women and children also face abusive behavior at home during lockdown periods (Chen et al., 2020; Xiang, et al., 2020). COVID-19 added a layer of burden to the frontliners who are already stressed even before the pandemic but now have to overcome other work-related stresses (Kelly et al., 2020). Many healthcare workers succumbed to being extremely vulnerable and helpless as the pandemic continued to rage in waves globally, and mutated strains of the virus are discovered in different parts of the world (Healy et al., 2020; Obara, 2021). The medical community continues to mourn fallen comrades on the frontlines.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed an important number of personal vulnerabilities and weaknesses. In a survey from *Linked-In Learning, workplace-based stress was associated with: 1) difficulty in achieving* career-life balance (70%); 2) insecurities about maintaining a stable job future (64%); 3) lack in sense of purpose / direction (64%); 4) friction with colleagues / work politics (63%); 5) lack of access to tools for managing workflow (62%). Among the Baby Boomers; Millennials and Gen X which comprise the three most dominant generations in the workforce, Gen X are the most, while the Millennials are the least stressed (Everest, 2019).

Stress is a natural human response to threat. It can build up a mountains of problems, and stay forever causing life-long troubles for a person's mental and physical health. If not identified and controlled at the right time, mental and emotional stress sneak into our life like an unwanted stalker. According to the American Institute of Stress, at least three-quarters of the population experience stress that affects their mental health.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Even sans the pandemic, however, so many adolescents, young adults and older persons are deeply confused about what they want to do in life. Some of these concerns may sound familiar: family problems, financial constraints, academic hurdles, career path choices and roadblocks, job transfers, sexual harassment, gender

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discrimination, cultural marginalization and stigmatization, and lifestyle changes brought about by chronic and terminal illnesses. Quite frankly, these are perfectly valid concerns, and we have to acknowledge how these issues impact the mental health of individuals.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), the Philippines rank third among the Western Pacific Region countries with the highest mental health problems. Approximately 6 million Filipinos are afflicted with depression and anxiety, which rank as the third most debilitating condition in the Philippines. In the Philippines, there is no country-wide suicide registry in place. Hence the prevalence of suicide is not apparent. The suicide rates set at 3.2 per 100,000 population might be under-reported also partly because suicide cases are often misclassified as "undetermined deaths" (Redaniel et al., 2011). Globally, suicide accounts for approximately 1.5% of all deaths among adolescents and young adults (WHO, 2017).

The Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) revealed that among Filipino adolescents aged 13 to 17 years old, 11.6% contemplated about committing suicide, and at least 16.8% attempted suicide once before 2015 (WHO, 2015). Additionally, many students engaged in violent activities with peers that resulted in 'unintentional' deaths. June 21, 2018 was a watershed day in Philippine legislation history when the Mental Health Act (Republic Act 11036) was officially signed into law after languishing for 20 years in Congress and Senate.

THE VUCA WORLD

We live in interesting times where change is a constant. Life used to be simple but it has certainly changed in myriad ways compared to years past due to disruptive technology. The rapidly changing times brought mental health issues due to varied stresses in personal and professional lives. As the modern world changes at a very rapid pace, its effects on mental health are more profound among individuals who are not equipped and have not evolved to cope with stress. Whether in one's personal or professional life, we are witnessing how the phenomenon called VUCA which refer to this uncontrollable and uncertain environment characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, infiltrates our life and impacts our mental health.

The origin of the concept of VUCA

Drawing on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, the term 'VUCA' was first introduced as a military coinage in 1987 by the U.S. Army War College to understand decision-making in strategic leadership. It was eventually adopted into the business world.

The challenges of the VUCA World

All four characteristics of VUCA are true of the challenges we face due to COVID-19:
- **V**olatility: The challenges brought about by COVID-19 are constantly taking place in a dynamic and rapid pace. Other factors contributing to the volatility include the rapidly changing climate, evolving global trends, economic crisis, and political complexity. The high level of political, social, and economic changes taking place worldwide, lead to rising levels of mental stress every day.
- **U**ncertainty: Indicates a world full of unknowns and probable outcomes where it is hard to make a prediction with confidence about when the pandemic will end or when we will have a cure.
- **C**omplexity: All aspects of life are affected by the pandemic— in complex ways, and the stress it brings are debilitating. Many individuals feel excessively stressed by the constant need to make dynamic decisions. The ubiquity of digital information available for decision-making, adds to the complexity of the situation. The infodemic of misinformation likewise add to the problem.
- **A**mbiguity: The COVID-19 pandemic is a battle against an unseen enemy and contributes to how we live in an ambiguous world.

NAVIGATING THE VUCA WORLD

The VUCA Response in the Business Sector context

Hunsaker (2020) recommended the following key responses for businesses to enhance organizational resilience: Value through Vision, Understanding through Unique experiences, Clarity through Collaboration, and Action through Agility.

The VUCA Response to promote Individual Resilience

The stress response is automatic, and presently, many people feel vulnerable, uncertain, and disconnected while blending and striking a sensitive balancing act between work and home life. Individuals see everything around them as a potential threat or reward, and they will likely find themselves struggling to adjust. Any change will always trigger emotional responses because the brain is innately wired to protect. Minimizing threats and maximizing rewards is the focus of individual motivation. Therefore minimizing threats is a much more effective motivator. (Everest, 2020). Promoting individual resilience characterized by the ability to quickly adapt and seize new opportunities is crucial to survive and thrive in a VUCA environment.

The following VUCA responses to promote individual resilience anchored on Hunsaker (2020) are hereby proposed: Visioning, Understanding, Clarifying, and Adapting. Visioning as a personal motivational response to counter volatility and promote mental well-being. Understanding as an individual cognitive response that requires a change in perspective to counter uncertainty and promote emotional plasticity. Clarifying as a purpose-driven personal behavioral response that requires moral courage to oppose complexity and promote spiritual strength. Finally, Adapting to change with agility as a personal transformational response to counter ambiguity and promote physical resilience. Competence in these skills will help individuals develop and utilize effective strategies for overcoming the broad array of challenges they face as they transition through life.

In conclusion, overcoming the challenges of uncertainty and complexity brought about by rapid change is crucial, and lifelong learners journeying through the VUCA world go through the most exhilarating experience. The primary goal to achieve mental health should be to build capabilities i.e., integrating cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and transformational perspectives while adapting and flexing to meet future needs (Mascarenhas, 2021).

As Forbes points out, "Whether we like it or not, there is only one thing we can be certain of: that things will remain changing in ways we cannot foresee or forecast" (Everest, 2020)

In this VUCA environment, which is our reality, we have no choice but to adjust to these unpredictable circumstances through VUCA responses in order to survive. Therefore, continuity will depend on our ability to be flexible and adaptable.

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