

# Don't Let Anxiety Fatigue Claim the Victory

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Elizabeth Denham  
Thompson

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“I have anxiety fatigue,” a clergy colleague commented with exhaustion in her voice.

Everyone else in the Zoom meeting immediately identified, and stories of what was happening personally and professionally came spilling out. Threaded through it all was a despair over the chronic anxiety around us.

Three decades ago, a leader in the field of family and organizational systems theory wrote about anxiety and leadership as it was playing out in American society.

In *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Rabbi Ed Friedman explored the effects of chronic anxiety on us as individuals, on our leaders whether president or parent, and on us as a society.

He described how acute anxiety can startle us into appropriate, creative responses that address and resolve the challenges that have been presented.

Although there is an initial increase in pain or discomfort, there is energy to push forward and produce effective change.

However, chronic anxiety does the opposite, keeping us stuck and draining our energy.

We are uncomfortable, so we seek quick fixes and easy safety that will relieve symptoms, rather than address fundamental change.

Our reactivity toward others increases, often turning vicious, while we become enmeshed with those who think like us. There is a tendency to shift blame to the “other,” scapegoating and demeaning them so we can feel better.

Even technological advances end up becoming perverted “into a force for irresponsibility, if not immorality,” Friedman writes.

Chronic anxiety envelopes us, but does not actually connect us, leaving us isolated and fearful.

Friedman argued that when a society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change, the chronic anxiety begins feeding back on itself, exacerbating the situation. Sound familiar?

Friedman’s thoughts help me gain perspective on why all of us are experiencing anxiety fatigue, not just the professional caregivers.

As we approach Labor Day in the U.S., amid our holiday celebrations, we remember the people, events and social justice issues that sparked a movement to reform labor laws over 100 years ago.

I can’t help but sense we are amid similar issues, conflicts and pivotal moments today.

Early in 2020, the acute anxiety over COVID-19 seemed to have a unifying effect.

For a few weeks, we responded to the acute anxiety with a spirit of cooperation, cohesiveness and altruism.

However, as time went on, the recession, political divides and cracks of disparity in our society have grown.

Educational systems from preschool to universities, faith communities from all persuasions and many businesses and nonprofits are struggling to figure out how to keep going, often castigated no matter their choices.

Questions arise about how to plan for the long-term, when the short term is difficult to navigate. As one meme put it, “PLAN is the new 4-letter curse word.”

Parents are exhausted. They worry about how they will maintain – or find – jobs, while also caring for home, spouses, extended family, children and multiple web meetings that conflict and clash in spaces that weren't designed to support this confusing setup.

Incidents of depression, abuse, suicide and addiction are rising. Our country's initial rush of acting together for the greater good has splintered.

Amid all of this, the spark from the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, within the context of so many others including the recent shootings in Kenosha, Wisconsin, has ignited a larger flame.

It calls us to pay attention to the millions of people who live on the margins and whose lives are more at risk simply because of the color of their skin and the accumulation of those risks compounded over time.

The very technology that allowed us to pivot quickly has often become a force for irresponsibility and group think.

Social media is littered with quick fix memes and divisive pundits that denigrate anyone who challenges their stance.

The screen time we endure for work, school, entertainment, family gatherings, hospital visits and even social and spiritual connections is wearying to our bodies, eyes and souls.

And yet, Friedman gives us guidance on how to break the stuckness we are feeling.

If we can build our resiliency to handle the tension between individuality and togetherness, maintain our integrity during crises and retain some semblance of self-differentiation as leaders within our communities, then we can craft new horizons that create lasting changes.

As we approach Labor Day 2020, may we lean into the challenges presenting themselves today, rising above the chronic anxiety to create lasting changes that shape the future.

Hopefully, you and I can resolve to be resilient leaders in our society by choosing:

- Stamina – pay attention to what you and others actually have the energy to do. Operate within that, even if others are doing it differently.
- Resources – Use what is available, even if others do greater or lesser things because they have different resources.
- Safety – Consistently operate within the parameters of what is safe and within acceptable risk factors for you and for those around you, even if others have a different set of parameters.

- Sustainability – Choose actions, activities and commitments that are sustainable over time. Focus primarily on what can continue to be done.
- Excellence – Choose what moves you and others toward excellence and health. This gives purpose, direction, energy and a sense of pride to what you have chosen to do.
- Grace – Choose grace. You, as well as others, will not do it all well or perfectly or with excellence at every turn, so choose grace.

We are all experiencing anxiety fatigue and chronic anxiety is debilitating, but we are also resilient.

This Labor Day, see the humanity in those around you, choose wisely, advocate for what strengthens resiliency in our society, giving yourself and others plenty of grace.

*Editor's note: This article is the first in a series this week for Labor Day.*

Elizabeth Denham Thompson

An ordained minister, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, ACPE Psychotherapist, Thompson is owner of Eremos Consulting Group in Colorado. She has provided consulting, coaching and therapy services with clergy and congregations in the Rocky Mountain region for 20 years.

[eremosconsulting.com/](http://eremosconsulting.com/)





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