**If You Feel Like You’re Regressing, You’re Not Alone**

by [Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg](https://hbr.org/search?term=merete%20wedell-wedellsborg)

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A picture containing envelope, yellow, table, sitting

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“I hate to say this right now, but I haven’t felt this energized in years,” one CEO I advise admitted to me during the first week of Covid-19 stay-at-home orders.

When I asked about the source of this energy, the CEO noted that the crisis allowed an unusual freedom of movement — strategically and as a leader — that he had forgotten about. The relief from budget constraints, the suspension of market expectations, and the welcome escape from the conformity of the daily routine all contributed to his unexpected reaction to working during the pandemic.

Another leader told me that she “had never been more productive” and felt vitalized by the fact that “suddenly every important task is getting done right now … not in a year … not beginning of next week, but right now.” She had been working non-stop managing stakeholders, giving interviews, dealing with her executive board, handling immediate threats, talking to competitors, and even uniting with old foes.

A senior executive summed up his experience in this way: “Everything just moves faster, priorities become crystal clear, and most people step up and unite around getting our company through the crisis in one piece.”

The three comments reveal that, for many, the first weeks of managing a crisis feel extremely meaningful and energizing. But when I revisited the same leaders a few weeks later, they reported that something had happened to their energy and to the way their team was collaborating. The adrenaline-fueled pace of the initial crisis response began sputtering. Problems became more complex and exhausting. The varnish started to crack. The glory faded. Fuses were short.

What explains this shift? In my experience as a psychologist and executive advisor, I’ve found that crises follow a rough pattern: Emergency. Regression. Recovery.

In the beginning, when the **emergency**becomes clear, team energy rises, and performance goes up. Almost all of us have unknown reserves. As the executives’ experiences reflect, this reaction feels full of purpose and much gets done. Leaders tend to become the best version of themselves in this phase, and teams instinctively pull together and become highly productive. Few people question the leaders’ authority, and teams work in hectic, but harmonious, ways. The urgency created by the shock paves the way for rapid decision-making and turbocharges teams’ bias for action.

Then the second phase hits: **a regression phase,**where people get tired, lose their sense of purpose, start fighting about the small stuff, and forget to do basic things like eat or drink — or they eat and drink too much.

The concept of regression comes from [developmental psychology](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/parenting/toddler/behavioral-regression.html) and describes how people roll back to a less mature stage when faced with pressure. Regression is one of the mind’s ways to defend itself from confusion and insecurity by retreating to an emotional comfort zone.

From combat psychology in particular, we know that regression is the most dangerous phase for teams. The most stressful events for soldiers don’t actually involve dangerous missions that require courage and action. They actually involve waiting: being in the middle of nowhere on a post, repairing equipment and handling administrative tasks, not being able to use their particular skills. It turns out that boredom, lack of new experiences, and monotony [can be much more stressful than combat](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-may-22-la-me-boredom-20100522-story.html).

I see this [war room fatigue](https://hbr.org/podcast/2020/04/managing-crises-in-the-short-and-long-term) in the leaders right now — and in their teams. It’s real and it is infectious, and it hits you like a hammer from one day to the next.

The regression phase is uncomfortable. It’s also unavoidable and cannot be skipped. Understanding what the phases looks like and how you can move through the toughest part of crisis will help you mitigate the performance drop.

The challenge for leaders is to pull through the regression phase in a constructive way and get to the **recovery phase** to reopen, rebuild, and prepare for the future. Here’s how.

**Getting Through the Regression Phase**

First, you need to identify how deep you and your team are into the regression phase. If you’re unsure, you might look for evidence in meetings: Energy will drop, decisions will take longer or not be made at all, and confusion and conflict may arise about the small stuff. Blabbering is a sign, as much as silence or unavailability. You can also look to yourself for indicators. As a leader, has your sense of conviction faded? Are you tired, mentally or physically? Do you have urges to withdraw? Does your temper flare uncharacteristically?

Second, you can to make three key moves to pull your team out of a regression.

**Disrupt the team and create a new “day one**.” The CEO in one team I work with felt stuck when she saw this dynamic play out on her executive team. The group was proud of their performance in the emergency, but now conference calls largely consisted of people bickering over details, second guessing each other, and interfering in each other’s domains.

So, she acted quite decisively on the team itself by radically changing it. She sent one team member home temporarily who was not adding value in this phase. She then addressed the rest of the team, noting that she personally wanted to take a step back to make sure that she had the time and space to take the long view again. She told her executive team members that they should all be able to take on her role and act as if they were the CEO on a day-to-day basis.

She then introduced a new structure and assigned new roles for each of the team members. One member was assigned the role of being “CEO of acute, day-to-day crisis management.” Another member was asked to lead the planning and act as “CEO of the recovery phase.” And then quite unusually, she added a new temporary member — an up-and-coming talent — and charged him with driving long-term strategic changes faster.

What happened? Those who had been assigned new roles became motivated and energized and with a clear mandate. Everyone was happy not to waste time on non-value input. And the CEO got back “[on the balcony](https://hbr.org/2001/12/the-work-of-leadership),” to borrow a phrase from Harvard Kennedy School professor Ronald Heifetz on the importance of gaining perspective and spending time on the major issues the company is facing.

Even if you are not a CEO, this tactic can work: You can release energy by resetting you team structure and assigning new responsibilities to capable team members, allowing them to cross-cut stale hierarchies, rigid role definitions, and red tape.

**Learn how to calibrate your team’s emotions**. Another method I have observed leaders using effectively during the regression phase involves the so-called *arousal level* of the team. The goal of this is to foster an environment where it is safe and legitimate – even for the supposedly hard-nosed team members — to be honest about their state of mind so you can begin to move forward.

Think of your arousal level as if you have an inner volume control or thermostat that you need to regulate. Start by asking yourself: Am I too hot emotionally, or too cool and relaxed? Rate yourself on a scale from 0 to 10. (The theory behind the method comes from Steve de Shazer’s [solution-focused therapy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solution-focused_brief_therapy); many therapists use scale questions like this one to calibrate their understanding a client’s state of mind.)

Ten involves super-red-alert and high-on-energy feelings. On the other end of the scale, 0 is feeling completely passive and drained. When you are leading through a crisis, the optimal place to be is in the range of 6-8: alert and ready to act, but not trigger-happy or manic. You are able to hold steady. When you are between 2-3, it feels almost like you are mentally and physically hungover. You might feel that what you do is useless any way and you start to feel irritated, frustrated with small stuff, or preoccupied and unavailable for your team.

This type of scale questioning can also be used by your team. Groups I work with have found it useful to start team-meetings by asking: “What’s your number today,” or they have used in messages for each other: “I am in the low single digits today.” In most cases, merely sharing your number sets in motion the conversation and support needed to move up the scale again.

**Aim beyond business as usual.**In a crisis, the textbook expectation of business leaders is to do all that is necessary to protect the value of their company. But sometimes going beyond that survival-first instinct is what can make your team see the light again and pull out of regression.

The best performing leaders I’ve observed today are spending their time thinking and talking about how their company can help solve the biggest problems the pandemic is unearthing. Instead of working through all the immediate clutter, they start facing the future, anticipating what’s next and where they can provide the most value. In crisis psychology, we call this reorientation.

Reorientation is the trigger that direct your team’s attention towards the **recovery phase**. You change the question from, “How can we handle the crisis?” to, “How can we move *out*of the crisis?”

Further, a crisis shines a light on how your company creates value for society at large. By being more than “just about business,” you cast your company not as a crisis victim or a crisis survivor, but as an essential actor — a contributor to the resolution of a complex health, social, and economic event.

Consider the following cases: A.P. Moller Maersk used its logistics capability to establish an “[rapid air bridge](https://www.maersk.com/maersk-bridge)” to secure a delivery of millions of face masks, face shields, and surgical drapes to health care workers. Luxury goods giant LVMH [quickly switched](https://www.ft.com/content/e9c2bae4-6909-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3) their production capacity from making perfume to hand sanitizer. Inditex, the owner of the clothing retailer Zara, used their highly flexible supply chain to [produce protective wear](https://www.forbes.com/sites/callyrussell/2020/03/19/zara-owner-starts-making-protective-face-masks-to-fight-coronavirus/#23e75ee36676) for medical personnel to prevent scarcity. The leaders of these companies are not just managing their own company crisis; they are helping to manage a systemic one as well.

This kind of thinking is not just a game for the giants. Reorientation starts with changing the focus of your team from the short-term risks to your company’s bigger-picture contribution and longer-term opportunities. Carving out team time to look ahead and talk about the next big moves can help your people gain energy, feel challenged, and reunite around a shared aspiration.

**Leading Through the Phases of a Crisis**

For a leader, a crisis can be both the finest hour and the darkest day. Teams will remember their actions and decisions — good and bad — for years to come. So, as you navigate the waves of the crisis, remember that each phase requires a different approach. Sometimes the phases don’t come in a neat sequence, so think of them as currents and counter-currents [speeding up or hindering your team’s progress](https://www.saxo.com/dk/battle-mind_merete-wedell-wedellsborg_haeftet_9788750045533).

Yes, at first, you can succeed by leading from the front line. But after the first few weeks of emergency, take a step back and make sure your team gets through the inevitable regression phase. This phase is uncomfortable, but also useful because the conflicts in the team can raise the toughest questions, bring forth new answers, and reset expectations to more realistic levels. Only then can you start charting the road to recovery and emerge from the crisis as a stronger team and a stronger company.

[Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg](https://hbr.org/search?term=merete%20wedell-wedellsborg&search_type=search-all) works as an executive advisor to senior-level leaders and teams. She has practiced clinical psychology and has worked extensively with the financial sector. She is the author of *Battle Mind: Performing Under Pressure*and holds a Ph.D. in Business Economics and an M.A. in Organizational Psychology.