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## **The link between long-term, low-intensity stress and security vulnerabilities**

*We are currently witnessing a disconcerting trend involving the increased harnessing of fear by politicians and the media in our societies. This is not simply a matter of questionable ethics, immoral behaviour and aggressive political dogma. It is about actions with real-world consequences for our stability, security and national defence capabilities. This has prompted us to write the first of a series of articles focusing on our society's new vulnerability and what we can do about it.*

### **Introduction**

Our psychological defence (defence against disinformation campaigns, propaganda and more) is directly affected by these vulnerabilities. It is easy to forget how our circumstances affect our behaviours and vice versa. Still, the most recent crises reminded us of just how much we can change, given the right circumstances.

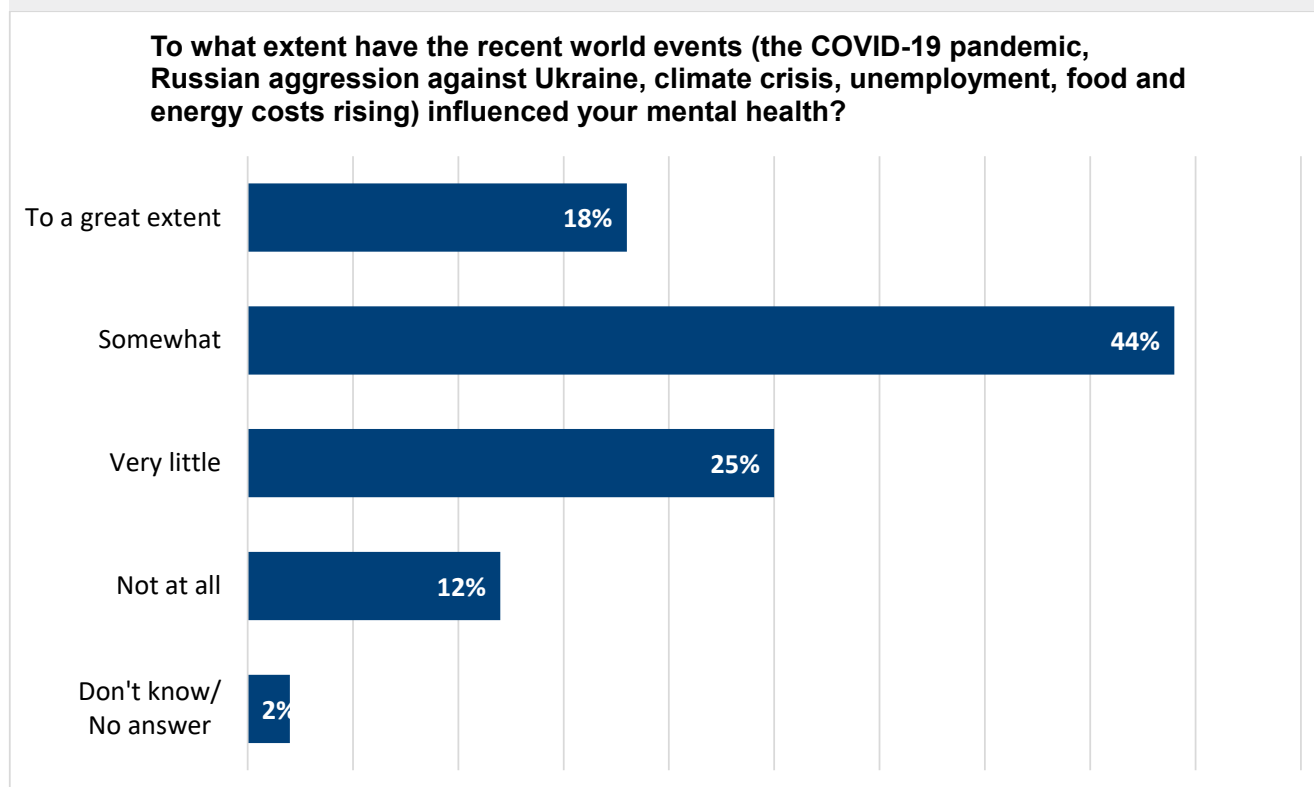
Harnessing human psychological vulnerabilities is an established military strategy that has been used since ancient times. They were discussed by the likes of Sun Tzu and Alexander the Great. Today, the same methods are used by unscrupulous corporations, criminals, terrorists and hostile regimes alike. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is one such example. This company was able to influence the outcome of elections and referendums that would impact politics and people's lives for years to come by manipulating our behaviour. The company was dissolved in the end, but its founders are still conducting the same kind of work, albeit in other organisations.

Stressed and fearful people are easy to divide and influence. Hostile regimes, criminals and extremists know this and use it to their advantage. When society is divided and people are fearful everyone becomes easier to con, no matter how smart or well-educated they are. This is part of the reason why the rate of fraud increased during the COVID-pandemic - and still continues to grow.

The good news is that we can reverse this trend. We can strengthen our psychological resilience, and render these strategies much less effective. One of the most important factors when it comes to psychological defence is baseline stress. We've all experienced irrational behaviour as a result of stress - the angry manager who aggressively micromanages his subordinates instead of enlisting their support, the student who procrastinates instead of studying on the night before a test, or the emotionally overwhelmed child who lashes out at parents, siblings or friends instead of asking for help and guidance. These reactions are usually the result of short-term stress and once the stress passes, we return to our normal behaviours.

But if we don't get a chance to fully recover, we begin to get used to the stress and we start to normalise and justify it. Eventually, we stop noticing it altogether, and the long-term stress becomes part of our baseline stress level.

**Figure 1:** The impact of world events on stress and mental health.



**Data:** Flash Eurobarometer 530, European Commission

This type of long-term stress is usually caused by uncertainty about the future, a lack of resources (money, food, appropriate clothing, unmet social needs, etc.) social isolation, and a sense of general insecurity and distrust. High baseline stress levels tend to lead to health problems over time, such as high blood pressure, heart problems, obesity, mental health issues and disturbed sleep patterns. This has been known for a long time and social initiatives often aim to address these exact issues.

## Sinking into the stress abyss

Just as with sudden stress stimuli, we react to an increase in baseline stress, even if we barely notice the increase at a conscious level. The change has several effects:

- Our perception narrows
- Our ability to make decisions decreases
- We lose access to our learned knowledge
- Our ability to process complex information decreases
- Our need for control increases
- Our need for familiarity increases
- We become more receptive to negative stimuli
- The route to cognitive dissonance becomes shorter

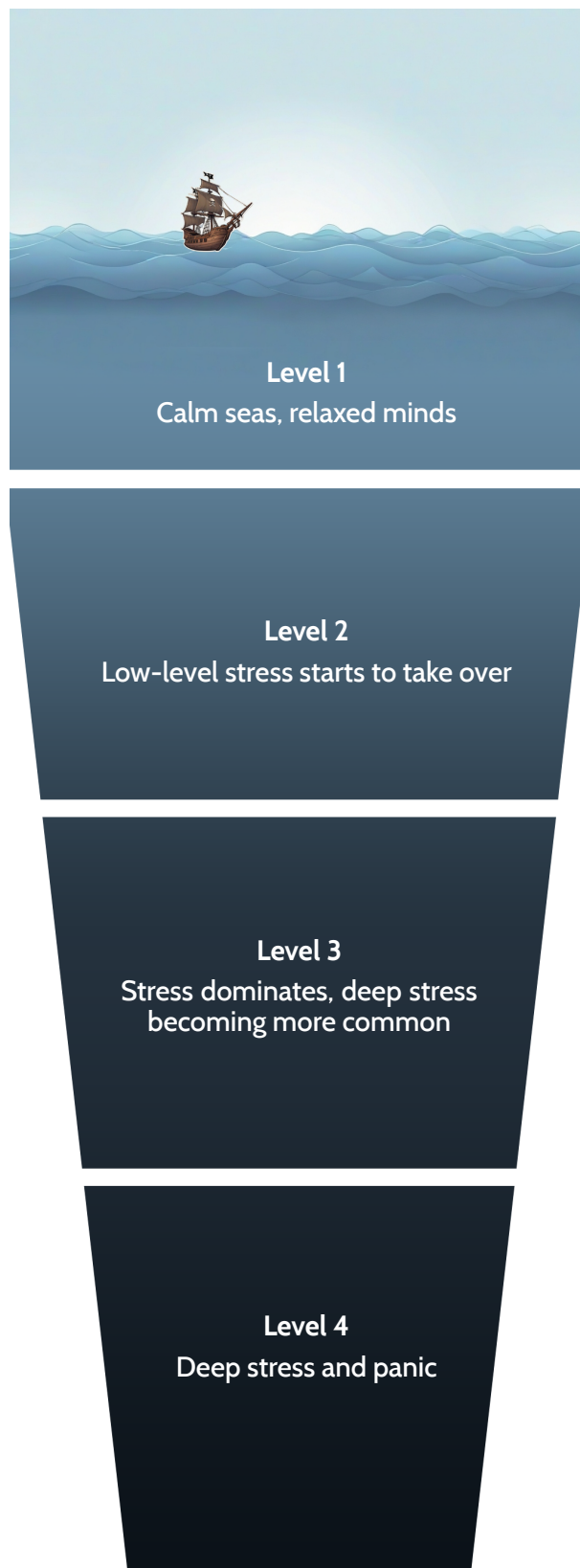
These effects become stronger, more pronounced and more dramatic, the deeper you sink into the stress abyss. Of course, how these effects manifest will depend on individual personalities, normal stress responses, self-awareness, education and training. Some people (eg. those who are skilled at mindfulness) will have greater resilience than others.

Let's dive in and see what it might look like in practice.

### Level 1 - The relaxed state dominates

At this level, we are relaxed most of the time. We still experience stress and still use heuristics and biases, but we quickly return to normal and the stress does not affect our health in a negative way. We perform and recover well and our tolerance is strong. Although we can reason clearly, we are limited by our experiences and our education. If we come across something we are not prepared for, or can not relate to, we still become vulnerable. This also means that we may not be able to understand people who are deeper in the stress abyss. Their behaviour often seems irrational, crazy or stupid from this perspective.

**Figure 2:** Accumulated stress is driving people deeper in the various levels of the stress abyss



## **Level 2 - Low-level stress starts to take over**

Suddenly something punctures our cosy little boat. We lose our sense of security and the world becomes a little bit less predictable. Perhaps we heard that there are layoffs planned in our department at work. Perhaps our child isn't performing well at school. Either way, we start to worry more and feel insecure.

The brain changes its decision-making strategy to conserve energy. Instead of calm, seasoned reasoning, we now turn more to rules of thumb, oversimplifications and other forms of heuristics. At this point, these decision-making shortcuts are still helpful and they can often help us address the problems that are at the heart of our source of stress. Most of us spend periods of our lives in this state - and most of the time, we recover. However, if we remain in this state for an extended period of time, it will start to affect our health. It can also make us more prone to errors, misunderstandings and various forms of bad decision-making. This is especially true if the stress keeps building.

## **Level 3 - Stress is the dominant state with dips into deep stress becoming more common**

If we don't get back to the surface, we will eventually sink deeper, and this creates physical changes in our neurobiology. In this state, the brain focuses on near-term survival. Helpful heuristics completely give way to biases and logical fallacies. Just as our judgement and decision-making ability takes a hit, our need for control increases further. This can lead to counterintuitive behaviour, such as hoarding, isolation, procrastination, substance abuse, aggression and violence.

Ironically, we may feel less stressed at this level, but this is a result of neurological changes. We start losing our self-awareness, our inhibition and our ability to empathise with other people. We respond more strongly to negative emotions - especially fear, disgust and anger, which creates a vicious cycle.

Unfortunately, these changes don't just affect our behaviour. They also make us more receptive to manipulation. We become more vulnerable to fraud, social engineering and radicalisation, for example.

## **Level 4 - Deep stress and panic**

If we sink this low, we start exhibiting herding behaviour. Our perception has now narrowed so much that we can neither perceive nor process complex information independently. We focus on the people in our immediate sphere of influence and copy their behaviour. It doesn't matter whether the behaviour is destructive or helpful.

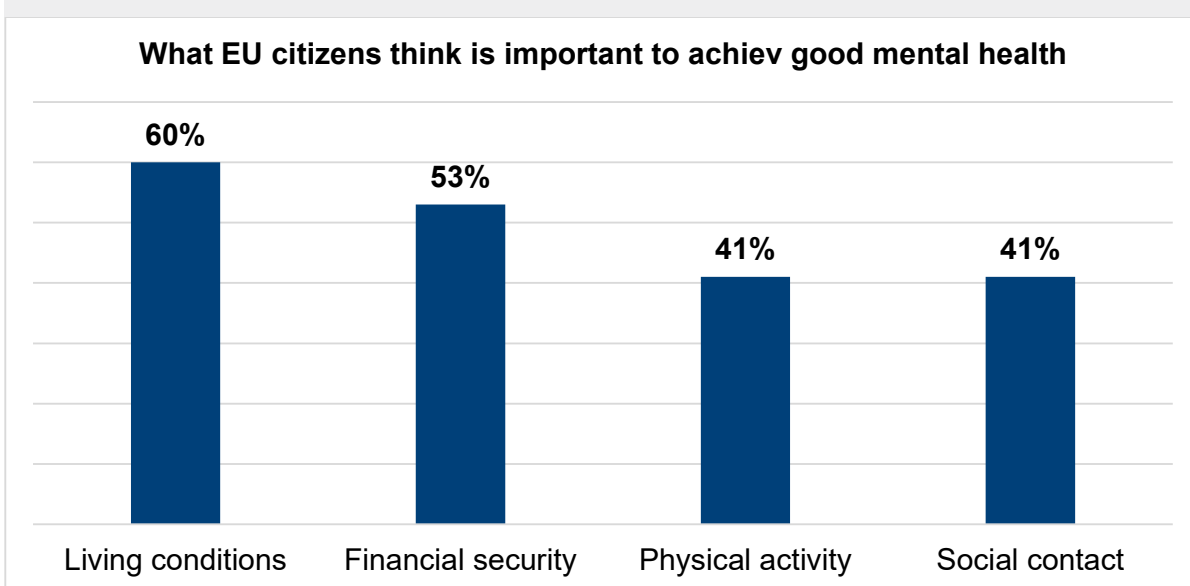
If enough people are in this state at the same time, the consequences can be devastating. Failure to escape a fire - even when there are readily accessible and visible escape routes - market crashes and bank runs. They may seem counterintuitive, but they are all events that can result from too many people being at the deepest level of the stress abyss at the same time.

## How does this impact security and defence?

There have been several widespread crises in just a few short years, impacting our general sense of safety, reducing certainty about the future and undermining our financial certainty in the short term. At the same time, both the media and our politicians pander to our deep-set fears, vying for our limited bandwidth to win viewers, recognition and voters. This creates a perfect storm, bringing the most vulnerable people in our society into the deeper levels of the stress abyss.

The members of society who are already exposed to high levels of baseline stress are the first to become vulnerable to operations by bad-faith actors. Some of these bad-faith actors are the kind of people you see in movies, such as fraudsters, extremist groups and foreign spies, but they can also consist of unscrupulous marketers, conspiracy theorists and petty criminals.

**Figure 3:** Factors contributing to good mental health



**Data:** Flash Eurobarometer 530, European Commission

Both extremist groups and foreign operatives are skilled at radicalisation. They start by engaging in accepted social discourse, playing on people's everyday prejudices. They then lead them deeper into a rabbit hole of increasingly stronger disinformation and fear until their target is fully radicalised, separated from reasonable voices and their group is the dominant influence. This is a slow process, with many steps along the way. Most people will not be fully radicalised, but they can skew public perception and acceptable political discourse. Those who are radicalised, on the other hand, will be very difficult to de-radicalise.

This is a win for both extremist groups and hostile governments who want us divided, passive and weak. It improves their surveillance and intelligence gathering prospects by manufacturing sympathisers. It can give them powerful allies. It moves the political needle in their favour. It makes us turn away and ignore what is happening. Finally, we lose the psychological element of the fight - and you don't have to be a military general to understand how that undermines the rest of our ability to maintain stability, security and an effective defence.

Fortunately, there are things we can do. We can:

- Remove or mediate some of the causes (uncertainty, financial pain, insecurity)
- Provide reliable pathways when someone has been wronged in the social support system
- Set expectations and heuristics (eg. Through school programs and public education initiatives)
- Strengthen people's awareness of and resistance to stress
- Remove the stigma from the topic of mental health
- Empower people to take action, rather than encouraging learned helplessness

## **How does this affect politics?**

When politicians and the media talk about policy, vision and how to deal with current challenges in any field, they often assume that the vast majority of people are in a reasonably consistent frame of mind - only a minority of psychologically damaged individuals make up the rest. However, this does not reflect reality - especially at a time where major struggles affect most people's lives in one way or the other. After all, many people in the extremist and conspiracy theorist fields are sane, well-educated individuals. Breivik was not crazy.

An understanding of this type of psychology impacts our ability to reach out, as a political movement. If we fail to consider it, we will fail to see why certain groups are becoming more popular, why others are declining and new ones are appearing. It also impacts our options for framing the debate. When times are uncertain and scary, a technical message, no matter how true, will not work because there won't be enough people who are able to communicate at that level. We simply will not reach them. We have to meet people where they are and help bring them back up and out of the stress abyss before we can change their minds. It also emphasises the importance of perception and transparency in policy, in addition to all the challenges of maintaining an evidence-based and accurate narrative.

## **We have to pay attention to people who don't share our views**

Our world is changing at an unprecedented rate. This means it has become very challenging for the average person to follow the pace of the news, social media and the daily onslaught of information. People in our society have different capabilities when it comes to processing information. Only a small percentage of the population can handle the full onslaught of information on a daily basis. These people are trained professionals who work in intelligence analysis, crisis management, investigative journalism and similar industries. They're still human beings and they still make mistakes, even with their information processing skills.

If you are not trained to handle vast amounts of information, there is no shame in feeling overwhelmed - because it really is overwhelming. It causes a constantly elevated level of alertness and simply trying to process more information will not help. If you have never received any training in information literacy, then discerning between good and bad information in this state is an even bigger challenge.

When we are sinking in the stress abyss, we naturally struggle to process complex information while being more easily drawn to negative and dramatic news. This makes it easy to get stuck in echo

chambers, compelling disinformation and relatable misinformation. We also tend to focus on what is familiar and try to retain control over it. It's not a new phenomenon. It's an evolutionary survival strategy that is programmed into our neurobiology.

Let's consider an example from history. Today, it seems totally natural for women to have the right to vote and engage in politics, but we forget that more women opposed the right to vote than supported it, particularly in the US. The reason for this was that many women feared that they may lose the rights, freedoms and authority they had gained in society if they also gained the right to vote. One could view this as a response to pressure to change and to a fear of the new responsibilities that this change would entail.

We see similar reactions today in regards to issues like immigration, domestic violence, economics, crime, social unrest and warfare. All these issues challenge the status quo and our sense of certainty and security. They hurl us into a world of financial and social uncertainty, full of unknown and dramatic threats to our daily life. You can just open a newspaper, turn on the TV or browse the internet to see and hear all sorts of speculation into what these threats will look like. That's more than enough to get people riled up, regardless of whether the scenario is realistic or not.

As we can see, a strong and aggressive stance against a particular issue is often an expression of an underlying fear. This can be as simple as the fear of change, the fear of uncertainty, the fear of harm to our loved ones or the fear of loss of social status. By identifying and acknowledging this underlying fear, it becomes possible to engage more productively on both an individual, community and national level.

At a time of prevalent polarisation in our societies, it can be very difficult (and risky) to try to listen to what the other side is really saying. But doing so will bring uncomfortable truths and misunderstandings to the forefront where the mists of rhetoric can be parted to show that tiny grain of a legitimate complaint that lies at the heart of it. This legitimate complaint tends to be reflected across political lines, and if we can focus on it, we can find ways of reaching out and uniting to resolve it.

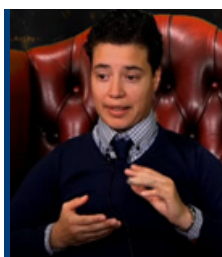
## **Conclusion**

When we are exposed to stress, our behaviours change, sometimes drastically. We are all vulnerable to these changes, but if we are exposed to stress for too long, it can also make us more vulnerable to fraud, political manipulation and radicalisation.

If we want to secure our society, we must stop empowering the enemy and focus on strengthening ourselves and each other. Rather than resorting to technology as a magic bullet for our problems, we must work on ourselves and get better at communicating with the people in our societies - both those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. Only then will we regain our security, our stability and our resilience.

Understanding how stress impacts our security and defence capabilities can help us build stronger and more resilient societies. It empowers us with the knowledge that we can bring back people who have been radicalised without any form of “thought police” or forced indoctrination. That they are not lost causes to be hidden, controlled or destroyed, but human beings doing things that are inherently human. It will still take a lot of work to get there, but understanding the problem is the first step towards a solution.

## About the Authors



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Doing Research on Hybrid warfare especially Information warfare. He works on resilience issues and is a cyber security consultant.



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