
STAY REAL



Optimism may not be the best psychological option in a crisis situation, writes TARNYA DAVIS.

WE TEND to see optimism as the desired psychological state for all occasions, and psychologist Martin Seligman speaks of optimism as being an essential part of positive psychology. Yet, in a crisis, a more functional state of mind may be appropriate: realism.

In a TED talk, Mark Pollock tells of Admiral Stockdale, a POW in Vietnam who was tortured for more than seven years. Stockdale credits his survival to his psychological coping inspired by stoic philosophers and realism. Stockdale indicated that other prisoners would tell themselves they'd be out by Christmas. When that didn't happen they were devastated. But Stockdale walked the line between confronting the brutal facts of his circumstances while maintaining a faith he would prevail.

As we face disasters such as fires, the greatest challenge to our survival is often the decision to leave our homes and seek shelter. Here we need to choose between optimism (if I stay I will be safe and save what I own) and realism (if I leave I will survive but probably lose everything I own). I can't imagine how terrifying these decisions are. These situations can trigger the fear response in the reptilian part of our brains that tells us "I'm not coping, I can't do this". We often try to counter that with an overly optimistic approach. But we can be both realistic and optimistic in how we speak to ourselves, just as you'd help settle a frightened friend. "This is a terrible situation, but you've got this, you can cope and you will manage just fine".

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