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MOOCs and beyond.

Will Pandemic-Era Traumas Have Lasting Effects?

> Lessons from the Great Depression.

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In some cases, emotional and psychological trauma subsides over time. In other instances, the impact persists. The numbness, anxiety, confusion, guilt and despair never fade.

Like long COVID, trauma's effects linger and last.

I often wonder: Will the pandemic's impact be like that of the Sept. 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks —deeply consequential for those who lost loved ones and family breadwinners as a result of the extremists' strikes and the military aftermath, but a horror that has faded for most others? Or will it be like the Great Depression, a seminal event that shapes the outlook of an entire generation and leaves an imprint that lasts a lifetime?

In 1966, Caroline Bird, a nonfiction writer whose many books include pioneering works of feminism, like *Everything a Women Needs to Know to Get Paid What She's Worth* and *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down*, published *The Invisible Scar*, a study of the Great Depression's psychological and social impact. The book's very title signaled its argument: that the Depression left an indelible imprint on the American psyche, profoundly shaping a generation's outlook, including its attitudes toward money, family, work, education and politics.

Her interpretation has entered into the conventional wisdom.

The wounds that the Depression inflicted, she argued, never diminished. The damage remained evident decades later in an obsession with security and caution, as well as extreme anxieties about destitution, privation and joblessness. The Depression's lasting scars could be seen in some men's shattered self-esteem, the stigma attached to unemployment and the deep ambivalence about poverty (evident in a sharp distinction drawn between the deserving and undeserving poor).

Anyone who grew up with a Depression-era parent knows firsthand the truth of Bird's observations.

A recent book entitled *Living on the Edge: An American Generation's Journey through the Twentieth Century*, by three well-known scholars of the life course—Richard A. Settersten Jr., Glen H. Elder Jr. and Lisa D. Pearce—offers a more systematic, longitudinal, theoretically informed perspective on the Depression's consequences. It also provides a critical vantage point for reflecting on the pandemic's possible long-term impact.

Their book draws on data collected as part of a longitudinal study initiated by Jean MacFarlane and the Berkeley Institute of Child Welfare in the late 1920s. The original subjects consisted of roughly 200 married couples, born between 1885 and 1904, who lived around Berkeley, Calif. The Berkeley study allows Settersten, Elder and Pearce to compare and contrast the experiences of four generations, including the primary subjects' parents, who were born in the second half of the 19th century and many of whom were foreign born; their children, born before and during the Great Depression; and their grandchildren, born after the Second World War.

The study examines the human impact and meaning of a host of life-changing developments, including migration to and from California, the Depression, two world wars, the post–World War II economic boom and a host of stunning innovations in technology, transportation and communications.

This book contains fascinating information about marriages (which were rarely viewed as major sources of satisfaction), children (a major source of fulfillment for women, but much less so for men) and the impact of the Depression on spousal relations (heightening marital tensions and igniting chronic disagreements about finances and child rearing). The authors report exceedingly low levels of spousal communication and discover that many "couples did not have a single friend or activity in common."

The study also examines the predictors of lifelong economic success and finds that the level of education was the most important correlate.

But the book's single most important takeaway involves the momentous, long-term impact of the Depression. To be sure, the Depression's impact varied widely by gender, class, age and education. But no one escaped its effects. If hard times and material loss sometimes pulled families together, in many cases, Depression-era stresses drove family members apart.

Responses to the Depression were heavily influenced by gender. As the authors note: "family hardship affected men more adversely than their wives." In many instances, Depression-era women assumed a more dominant role in the family, thanks to their earnings, caregiving responsibilities and central role in household management. At the same time, many men experienced a sharp decline in self-esteem, not just because of their loss of pay, but the loss of their symbolic role as family provider. According to the authors, the Depression inflicted a heavy cost on husbands' health and longevity during their 40s, 50s and 60s.

The study reinforces the generalization that the Depression produced strong women and defeated men, enhancing many middle-class women's assertiveness, confidence, resourcefulness and sense of self-efficacy, while a significant number of working-class women exhibited more passivity or feelings of vulnerability in later life.

If I were to draw a lesson for our own time from *Living on the Edge*, it is this: as bad as the Depression's financial toll, its social and psychological effects were at least as damaging and were certainly longer lasting. Not even the post–World War II economic boom could compensate for the Depression's damage.

Thanks, in part, to the emergency economic assistance provided by the federal government to individuals and families during the pandemic, most college students stayed afloat financially during the lockdown. But the pandemic's emotional toll is another story. The pandemic undercut their sense of life's predictability and already flagging confidence in the future, fostering anomie, alienation and isolation.

In the pandemic's wake, many of my students have developed trauma-like symptoms. Many of my students strike me as intensely anxious, depressed, fearful, numb and persistently sad. Among the behavioral red flags I see are signs of withdrawal, disconnection, stress, frustration, a loss of focus and pent-up rage.

Some of these feelings can be traced directly to the pandemic, but others are cumulative, outgrowths of the Great Recession, compounded by more amorphous anxieties and apprehensions: over the climate, the job market, the future of American politics and pervasive forebodings about the future.

The Settersten, Elder and Pearce study contains a piece of wisdom that I'd like to share. The authors state bluntly that "our lives are not our own." Rather, our lives are embedded in economic, familial, political and sociological contexts that we as individuals only partly control. Those contexts affect us, influence us, shape us and define us, in ways that are generally unconscious and involuntary yet powerful and inescapable nonetheless.

Unlike the Great Depression, the problems our students confront are far more psychological and emotional than financial. That is not, of course, to belittle, underestimate, play down or make light of these challenges—and claim, irresponsibly, that our students' problems are "all in their heads." But it is to suggest that those of us who are older, who have lived through our own traumatic or disruptive experiences, might be in a position to offer some solace, perspective, support and practical advice.

In recent years, the concept of trauma has broadened (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1082418) from its original association with severe physical injury to encompass psychological stressors or harms and their consequences, typically involving feelings of intense

fear, helplessness or loss. Our institutions have responded to pandemic-era trauma by instituting wellness days, offering resilience training and expanding mental health counseling. But that's not enough.

What should we, as faculty members, do?

I personally favor providing students with structure, generous but firm deadlines, numerous low-stakes assessments, frequent nudges and well-defined expectations, unlike some colleagues who prefer flexibility, options and frequent expressions of empathy.

Regardless of which tack you choose, remember: as faculty members, we bear personal responsibility for our students. Reach out. Be proactive.

I worry that too many faculty members (myself included) feel frustrated and annoyed by the demands that students place on our time. Too often, we begrudge their impositions. We regard their need for advising and guidance as a nuisance and a hassle. We treat the effort spent developing their basic academic skills or providing feedback as a burden and a waste of our precious time. We especially resent the social justice demands they raise.

So let me share a relevant literary quotation provided by my "Higher Ed Gamma" partner Michael Rutter. It's from John Williams's *Stoner* (1965), one of Michael's favorite academic novels:

> "It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear. We give out the reasons and we let a few of the ordinary ones in, those that would do in the world; but that's just protective coloration. Like the church in the Middle Ages, which didn't give a damn about the laity or even about God, we have our pretenses in order to survive. And we shall survive—because we have to."

Years ago, I was one of a group of graduate students who asked the Yale department's best teacher why he taught. He responded with five words: "It comes with the job."

So let me conclude with this thought: mentoring students doesn't come with the job. It is the job. Everything else is just embellishment.

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