

ELKE GERAERTS

THE MENTAL RESET

How hybrid work and life
strengthen your resilience

Lannoo

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INTRODUCTION

MY BIG RESET

28 March 2020. It was a moment that sent shivers down my spine. In amongst the doom-laden news about Covid, a video clip caught my attention. Opera singer Sarah Defrise Nirenborg and her pianist partner gave a concert on the patio outside their home in Brussels. As arias by Gershwin and Puccini filled the air, neighbours emerged one by one. They leaned out of the windows of anonymous blocks of flats or stood close together in their household bubble on tiny balconies. Some daredevils even climbed the walls of their urban gardens to get a better glimpse of the opera singer. Each song was greeted with loud applause, with the decibels increasing every time, so it seemed. I watched the video again and again, moved by how the neighbours reached out to one another, each on their own island and yet still with that connection. I saw hope, beauty and emotion. I drew strength from the way that people in full lockdown never gave up. Despite the crisis we were in, there was still so much to be happy about.

In the days that followed, I recharged my batteries with similar video clips. I was touched by how the people of Italy, at that point the worst affected country in the world, sang from their balconies to give one another courage. The author Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, who lives in Genoa, put it neatly in his Covid diary: “It was an unexpected sign of life and resilience. It turned out there were fellow sufferers behind all those closed windows. The streets had been deserted for days, but the people were still there. For the five minutes that the concert lasted, they kept up their courage and comforted one another by showing they were still alive.”

I also became addicted to the live Instagram videos of the Italian Michelin-star chef Massimo Bottura, who had to temporarily close his restaurant in Modena because of the coronavirus. Instead,

he took to showing his 1.2 million followers what was cooking in his pots and pans every evening. In his Kitchen Quarantine clips, we saw his human side as well as his passion for his profession. There he was, preparing ordinary everyday dishes for his family. The top chef did not hide the fact that his youngest son Charlie has a mental disability either — it doesn't get more authentic than that. It was also surprisingly comforting to see Massimo preparing his fresh pasta with tomato sauce after a hard day at work.

His videos inspired me to start my own new habit. We were all finding it really difficult that my parents were unable to see their grandchildren during the lockdown. Normally they see one another every week. Also, I'm their only daughter. So I decided to instigate a brief FaceTime session with them around the children's bedtime. I would normally find daily video calls rather boring but now it soon became a good way to feel some kind of connection. Even if the girls were sometimes dropping off to sleep — Florence and Feline were only five and six — and we didn't always say much, it was still a special moment. I experienced at first hand every day that even in a crisis, you can still begin something new. It was the start of my mental reset.

It promised to be a major reset. The Covid crisis wiped out the schedule for my company, Better Minds at Work, in one fell swoop. While the costs continued unabated — I refused to furlough my staff — I found myself as the CEO dealing with entrepreneurial risks such as I had never experienced in my previous career in academia. My private life was even more turbulent. My marriage fell apart just before the first lockdown. In the first few months of the pandemic, my ex and I were still living in the same house. The restrictions were literally preventing me from leaving. But I felt rejuvenated by the idea that I would soon be making a new start.

However, I did not realize how difficult the months ahead would be. Although I know a lot of people who have gone through a divorce, it felt as if no one had ever told me how hard that is when children are involved. There is so much sadness and distress. After I had moved out, it felt inconceivably unnatural having to drop the girls off at their father's house every week. I had not anticipated the pain of no longer being a family. The weekends without the girls felt very empty, a feeling that was exacerbated by the Covid measures.

After a few weekends of inactivity and wallowing in misery, I decided this had to stop. By giving in to the pain, I was sinking deeper and deeper in a negative spiral. I knew this wasn't going to put an end to my misery or help me process things, so I looked for activities that would give me energy. Instead of spending my Saturday mornings on Netflix, I started the day with 15 minutes of yoga. Instead of chomping down a fatty snack, I jumped on my racing bike. And when I didn't have enough stamina to give it my all on my bike, I went for a walk in the fresh air. I often took my first book, *Better Minds*, with me. Everything I had once written about resilience I now put into practice. For example, I tried to pause and examine my thoughts. What was I thinking about? How rational were those thoughts? What kind of a vicious circle had I got into?

Slowly but surely, I turned my crisis into a source of strength. Now, in November 2021, not only does *Better Minds at Work* have a full schedule again but I have a new book. I have become more of a hands-on mother for my children and in the relational sphere I have found happiness again with Bert. Thanks to my mental reset and the years I had invested in my mental capital, I was able to rapidly rebuild my life...and improve it. "Build Back Better", as the US president Joe Biden would say.

In this book, I want to show how everyone, from individuals to companies and from teenagers to politicians, can use a crisis as a catalyst for positive change. Nor does it stop there. My ambition is for *Mental Reset* to become a model for growth, quite apart from the Covid pandemic or any other crisis. I want this book not just to inform you but also to inspire you to reset your own life. Reset in the sense of building back better. I call it bouncing forward rather than bouncing back. The key is investing in your mental capital, preferably proactively. And you do that by concentrating on resilience.

In the first two chapters, I focus on the challenges we are facing and how we can convert them into opportunities. Then I call on our governments to do more to facilitate future changes in ways that take into account how our brains work. The real work begins in the third chapter, where I give mental levers for a successful reset.

In the next two chapters, I examine in more depth what work will look like in the future and how we can make brain-aware choices. Few areas of our lives were affected so dramatically by the pandemic as work. Many people experienced at first hand how exhausting working from home can be. But there is huge potential in hybrid working — switching flexibly between home and the office and preferably with a whole range of individual options for employees. Hybrid working is the future, but that will require a major mindset shift for a lot of companies. A new era also needs new leaders. In Chapter 5, I consider what that new leadership should look like and explore how we can really get the best out of hybrid companies and other organizations.

I have devoted my final chapter to the young, a group that was hit by this crisis just when they were in an important stage of their development. Too often they have been called ‘a lost generation’, whereas I have high hopes that they will become a particularly empathic, resilient generation. That won’t just happen automatically of course, which is why I explicitly address people working in education and policy in this chapter. After all, the post-Covid era is not just a chance for individual employees and companies to make a mental reset, but also the perfect opportunity for our education system to make brain-aware choices.

‘Brain-aware’ is a term you will encounter repeatedly throughout this book. I never cease to be surprised at the fact that although we have known for years what we should do to make choices for our brains that give us long-term happiness and success, we still fail to put this into practice. Yet in the strange eighteen months we have just been through, I also saw how we suddenly adopted a whole new way of living and working. So that reset is possible.

That is the message I want to get across with this book. Things will never be the same again — and thank goodness for that! This new era offers us more possibilities than ever before to take a different, hybrid approach to our lives and our work. Hopefully my book will inspire you to embrace that hybrid life and make your own distinctive version.

CHAPTER 1

MAKE IT COUNT

WHY THE GOOD OLD DAYS
WEREN'T NECESSARILY
THAT GREAT

“Iceland now feels like the corona crisis never happened,” was a CNN headline in June 2020. In May 2021, I read on Vox that “Bosses are acting like the pandemic never happened” and in January 2021 Belgian newspaper *De Morgen’s* China correspondent Leen Vervaeke wrote an article with the title “As if nothing happened. That is Wuhan today.” Of course, I too am pleased I can go out for a meal with my friends again and the children can restart their swimming lessons, but I find media headlines like this rather depressing nevertheless. We seem to have forgotten that the pre-Covid world had its problems too. Many people see COVID-19 as the main reason for the brain crisis that is spreading and worsening. People feel drained and exhausted, there is a seemingly unstoppable epidemic of burnout and depression, and loneliness is affecting young and old. But we forget that in terms of our mental health, red lights were already flashing before COVID-19. Some people actually found life and work easier during the coronavirus crisis because it briefly brought the dreaded rat race to a stop.

Our brains have been under pressure for a long time

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The World Health Organization (WHO) published the following dizzying figures. Nearly one billion people have a psychiatric disorder and everyone runs a risk of it, regardless of where they are in the world. Depression is a key cause of invalidity around the world and is a major factor in the global sickness burden. An estimated 5 per cent of the adult population worldwide suffer from depression. One in seven youngsters aged 10 to 19 has a mental disorder. Half of these disorders start around the age of 14 but most remain undetected and untreated. Suicides account for one in a hundred deaths. Suicide is the fourth biggest cause of death for young people aged between 15 and 29.

The loss of productivity due to depression and anxiety costs the global economy an estimated one trillion dollars. Compare that with the fact that countries spend only 2 per cent of their national healthcare budgets on mental health.

Despite all these dizzying figures, there has been little change in the past few years. Hopefully the pandemic will finally spark off a turnaround, but at present it has primarily led to long waiting lists for psychologists and a shortage of beds for long-term mental health treatment. In my own circle, I know of a young person who was struggling with suicidal thoughts and had to wait for a year. Another person had addiction issues and also had to wait a year to get help. If you don't have the money to pay for an expensive psychiatrist in private health, you have nowhere to go. There is crisis

help, but it often doesn't amount to much more than occupational therapy. Two weeks later, you're sent home.

It is shocking to see how much money and attention there is for our physical health and how little for our mental health. This pressure our brains are under urgently needs to be tackled, but that in itself is not enough. Whenever you have such pressure, you also need the courage to focus on prevention.

Fanning the flames

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In short, the pandemic was not the main culprit behind the mental health crisis; the situation was already perilous. But COVID-19 — and especially how we dealt with the pandemic — did fan the flames. Vigorously. A year and a half of social isolation, stress, uncertainty and the (perfectly legitimate) fear of catching the disease: the coronavirus crisis tested our resilience to the utmost. There were no vaccines or other solutions available at first, and for a long time we had no idea when or how we would ever be able to resume our normal lives. On top of that, the crisis was unexpected and no one was properly prepared.

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that many people became caught in a vicious circle of negativity. Especially when you think that our primeval brain — that part of our brain that is geared to survival and is hypersensitive to danger — happens to like wallowing in negative news.

BWAH DE VIVRE

“I don’t recognize myself. I’m normally quite a positive type but now I can’t stop worrying.” Does that sound like you? Or have you found the coronavirus crisis took a toll on your mental health in other ways? You will be pleased to hear that in many cases the problem is temporary, without any long-term effect on your mental wellbeing. “After most potentially traumatic experiences, the vast majority of people will only see a temporary, limited impact on their mental health,” clinical psychology professor Patrick Luyten assures us in a newspaper article. Minimal-impact resilience is the norm, he says.

Nearly everyone experienced minor symptoms. The *New York Times* called “languishing” the dominant emotion in 2021. Languishing means feeling ‘blah’. *Bwah de vivre*, as a caller on a Brussels radio programme so fittingly called it. In the face of a life that seemed to have lost its élan, we became flat and apathetic. While before Covid we sometimes complained about an excess of stimuli, now we suffered from a lack of novelty. It was the same old, same old. Each caught in our individual bubble, we were all stripped of our sparkle.

One effect of this life devoid of stimuli is deterioration in our cognitive powers. To give an example, in June 2021 I saw a photo on Instagram of a friend who was about to set off for an exotic island. Normally I’m the type who loves to travel but now I caught myself thinking: what a hassle, definitely not for me. It seemed cognitively demanding to have to apply for the right documents and have my trip depend on the results of a PCR test. And yet in 2018 I didn’t find it a problem to go through the visa application process for Saint Petersburg, which was an awful lot more hassle than a simple PCR test. But now arranging that test for my family seemed an almost impossible task.

You can compare the cognitive deterioration with the symptoms of bore-out or when children are locked away in a room and deprived of stimulation for months on end. In the past year “everyone we know has gone a little bit Kaspar Hauser”, wrote columnist Eleanor Margolis in *The Guardian*, referring to the German boy who turned up after spending sixteen years in solitary confinement in the early nineteenth century.

Fortunately, our brains are quite flexible and resilient. You can recover from the cognitive deterioration by gradually adjusting to normal life again, picking up the threads little by little so that

your mental pathways can rearrange themselves. The phrase “little by little” is very important. Some people may have discovered first hand that it is not a good idea to throw yourself in the deep end, when their first day back at the office also included their first post-pandemic train journey and their first visit to a cafe for drinks with co-workers.

All those stimuli can make you feel like your head is about to explode. That is perfectly normal, says psychologist and happiness expert Josje Smeets. “Our brains have adapted to the long lockdown with very few stimuli. When you are then suddenly exposed to repeated extreme stimulation, for example because you are partying a lot, your brain will go into stress mode.” That does not mean we should not take this issue seriously. “In the longer term, this can damage your mental health and may even lead to burnout.”

Psychiatrist Dirk De Wachter also recommends taking time to readjust. “I hope I don’t sound like an old fogey but we need to pace ourselves. So we should be cautious rather than plunging back into life with loads of activities after Covid. Don’t get obsessed with the idea ‘I have to do it now’. Slowly build up the partying and night-life; plan pauses in your diary. Not because I say so but because your mind needs it.”

The good news is that the habits that we want to pick up again may have been on hold for a while but they have not disappeared from our memory for good. Just as you don’t forget how to ski if you miss a year, so the habits of shaking hands, socializing at a family do or going crazy at a rock concert haven’t withered away in our brains. While we soon got used to not giving people a hug when we met them, and even found it strange to see characters hugging in films during lockdown, we will equally quickly find it

perfectly normal once it is allowed again. The hugging habit is still wired into our brains and can be reactivated relatively rapidly.

THE DISILLUSION OF FREEDOM

“At first I couldn’t understand why my girlfriend found the pandemic so much harder going than I did,” a colleague said to me. “But then I realized that as an extrovert she really missed the social contacts whereas I am an introvert and was quite happy to spend more time on my own, in fact. Now our social lives have resumed, our diaries are full once again with dinners with friends. I never used to have a problem with that but now I sometimes catch myself balking at those evenings.”

For some people, rather than harming their mental health, Covid brought relief. They enjoyed the peace and quiet, exercised more, ate more healthily and felt mentally stronger. Having to face the busy world again is a challenge for introverts or people with autism. Highly sensitive people may also experience a setback at this stage. What if their employer expects them to return to the office three days a week, proposing two days working from home as a privilege? What if they no longer feel able to cope with the hustle and bustle at the office and the stress of the commute?

During the pandemic, many people discovered there were things they would rather no longer do in future. When the amusement parks opened again in the spring of 2021, I stood in a line of hundreds of people queuing to get into Walibi near Brussels. “Great! Rollercoasters and quality time with my daughters,” I’d thought that morning. We three had been looking forward to this day out for a long time, but as we stood in the queue I felt more and more despondent by the minute. How was that possible? When I had looked forward to the trip for so long?