

Robinson Crusoe never had to meet academic deadlines: scholarly pressure in the age of COVID-19

Nina Maria Fanaropoulou

School of Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

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Corresponding author:

Nina Maria Fanaropoulou
School of Medicine
Faculty of Health Sciences
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Greece
E-mail: nfanarop@auth.gr

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MANUSCRIPT

Daniel Defoe's timeless novel, inspired by the adventures of a real Scottish sailor, tells the compelling story of a shipwrecked man who survived for 28 years on a desert island. The novel is a deliberate description of his endeavors to build a sustainable life for himself in previously unimagined conditions, fighting titanic battles with cannibals, externally, and exasperation, internally.

Robinson Crusoe has become an archetypal figure in literature, starring in a scrupulous examination of the human experience in isolation, endurance and transformation.

Endurance and transformation are what I, as a medical student nearing the end of my studies, hope to display during a pandemic that, as has been widely discussed, has drastically changed what we previously took for granted in regard to social life, work and home normality. But, in a time of fierce scholarly competition,

covering essential needs in isolation or crisis may threaten academic thriving – can a modern Robinson Crusoe still manage? Thankfully, for me, the former goal has been much easier than it was for Crusoe. On the other hand, I have felt like I am faced with a different kind of a subtle environmental pressure.

Undeniably, there were some breaking moments in life before the pandemic, too. If I lost a beloved one, or received a medical diagnosis, or had any other challenging circumstance forced upon me, I could usually take some time away from university and expect understanding for missed social gatherings. My friends, colleagues and supervisors would – hopefully – respect my plight and show affection and leniency. Since such misfortunes didn't happen simultaneously for everyone, it was possible for me to make individual plans to gain back the lost time after returning. During quarantine, with everyone away from work at the same time, I subconsciously felt that this “unprecedented” situation somehow took me and my peers all to the same point in the scholarly marathon. In other words, I felt like we were all having equal chances of making comparable progress while away from work. Gradually, a new kind of stress appeared, in my illusion that when we're free to resume normal work, the number of seized opportunities or completed manuscripts will be a fair metric of our academic skills and accomplishments. Just as in hide-and-seek, all players have the same amount of time to find the optimal hiding place, and the winner will be the one who was able to hide most effectively.

But after reading several COVID-19 related stories and views from academics around the world, and also hearing about my peers' and friends' experiences, I now understand my faulty assumption on the ground that we were simply not the same before this pandemic. Some players could run faster, while others had to carry monkeys of various kinds on their backs.

Thus, it cannot be the case that my unique circumstances can suddenly be ignored during a world-shaking time-stopper. Unfortunately, the deaths announced on the daily news have represented real members of real families. My own family's wallet, pantry, relationship integrity and patience have also suffered, more or less than they have for numerous other families around the world.

Chronic conditions among my loved ones did burst out. On top of that and despite my best efforts, my much-awaited summer research internship abroad got cancelled, while even university exams, graduation dates and classes were majorly disrupted. Never had I ever imagined that, while padding my CV with “adaptability under pressure”!

In search of a real-time connection to the world, I turned to social media in quarantine, but it didn't take long before I sensed that their virtual reality was only making matters worse. Remember when we were discussing how social media had a massive negative influence on our expectations, self-perception and confidence? Attending work and social gatherings had somewhat balanced this for me, by providing a picture of my friends' and colleagues' lives in real time. However, distancing threw this balance off, since my main “newsletter” consisted of tweets, Facebook statuses, posted pictures and Instagram stories.

Repeatedly coming across “productivity porn” and home workout posts often brought me to the verge of feeling unworthy for not maintaining an ideal schedule from home – unsuccessfully trying to deliver assignments while caring for vulnerable family members through tele-contact with their attending physicians, shifting everything that could be shifted online, completing house chores and budget reallocation, or simply using my medical background to help my family understand the news and information

they were getting. Especially the latter proved more demanding than I had expected, serving as a glimpse into the perennial difficulty of gaining public trust as a healthcare professional.

The best solution for maintaining sanity proved to be a conscious effort to resist overconsumption of online content, because it only represented snapshots. What was my social milieu doing before and after that dreamy scenery of books, coffee and a laptop by the window? They may have been experiencing anything between serenity and despair, and this would have been totally acceptable. They were still carrying their monkeys, and new ones might have been added. Besides, even when I didn't pay that much attention to social media, uncertainty and anxiety took their toll when I least expected them to; on days when even the fact that Albert Camus completed one of his masterpieces, "the Plague", during quarantine, did not seem motivational anymore.

I promised myself to avoid quick judgments, when the time came to go back to the race and take a look around at where everyone would be standing. I actively dismissed my urge to set for myself or my research team checklists of what must have been done by the end of lockdown, simply because we could not know when that would be, or how we were going to get to it. I dumped my strict to-do lists, which had somehow gotten even stricter since the beginning of quarantine, to "have completed one review, begun one more, finally finished that online extra-curricular course, cleaned-up every wardrobe, relaxed" (what even is a measure of relaxation?). What got me through the early stage of the pandemic was operating on a day-to-day basis, taking small, steady steps, and supporting the needs of my team instead. And guess what? Focusing on just following the distancing orders, securing my family's wellbeing and preserving my own peace of mind let me find time

to both study for my exams and complete a few other academic commitments along the way.

All things considered, I am optimistic that despite tragic losses, we'll also be left with favorable outcomes. As Malcolm Gladwell describes in his book "David and Goliath", which offers an alternative interpretation of "underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants", obstacles can be springboards instead of setbacks. Similarly, although it might seem hard during a public health crisis, now has been a time for an inquisitive mind like mine to take some rest out of a daily schedule bombarded with tasks and assignments, reset and even burst with creativity in unexpected ways. Forever being a night owl, I could finally afford to lose sleep at 4 am and write down that sudden explosion of ideas about current and future projects that crossed my mind, without having to worry much about my usual, rushed 7 am wake-up. I was able to grasp the words of the Imperial College researcher Mattias Björnmalm, in his article "Taking a break is hard work, too: exciting, novel ideas do not come from a mind constantly under pressure¹⁷".

Having served for years as a program officer in children's summer camps, I have witnessed children struggling to adapt to new habits, like cleaning their shelters and taking turns setting the table for their peers. But after the struggle always came the pleased voices of parents, noting how impressively their son or daughter went back home and, for the first time, did the same. I fervently hope that in this crisis, lessons learnt and activities altered for good will eventually survive through time, as societies utilize change towards improvement.

We weren't asked about it, but I believe that, in fact, we are all part of the greater COVID-19 Task Force. Whether we accept it or not, one thing is for sure: "Coming out of our cages", we likely now have to re-introduce ourselves.



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