

OUTLOOK

Psychological barriers to success are undeniable



David Brooks says focus has shifted to the emotional reactions that impede learning, such as constant movement and economic anxiety.

In the 1990s, Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda conducted a study on adverse childhood experiences. They asked 17,000 mostly white, mostly upscale patients enrolled in a Kaiser HMO to describe whether they had experienced any of 10 categories of childhood trauma. They asked them if they had been abused, if their parents had divorced, if family members had been incarcerated or declared mentally ill. Then they gave them what came to be known as ACE scores, depending on how many of the 10 experiences they had endured.

The link between childhood trauma and adult outcomes was striking. People with an ACE score of 4 were seven times more likely to be alcoholics as adults than people with an ACE score of 0. They were six times more likely to have had sex before age 15, twice as likely to be diagnosed with cancer, four times as likely to suffer emphysema. People with an ACE score above 6 were 30 times more likely to have attempted suicide.

Later research suggested that only 3 percent of students with an ACE score of 0 had learning or behavioral problems in school. Among students with an ACE score of 4 or higher, 51 percent had those problems.

In Paul Tough's essential book, "How Children Succeed," he describes what's going on. Childhood stress can have long-lasting neural effects, making it harder to exercise self-control, focus attention, delay gratification and do many of the other things that contribute to a happy life.

Tough interviewed a young lady named Monisha, who was pulled out of class by a social worker, taken to a strange foster home and forbidden from seeing her father for months. "I remember the first day like it was yesterday. Every detail. I still have dreams about it. I feel like I'm going to be damaged forever."

Monisha's anxiety sensors are still going full blast. "If a plane flies over me, I think they're going to drop a bomb. I think about my dad dying," she told Tough. "When I get scared, I start shaking. My heart starts beating. I start sweating. You know how people say 'I was scared to death'? I get scared that that's really going to happen to me one day."

Tough's book is part of what you might call the psychologizing of domestic policy. In the past several decades, policymakers have focused on the material and bureaucratic things that cor-

relate to school failure, like poor neighborhoods, bad nutrition, schools that are too big or too small. But, more recently, attention has shifted to the psychological reactions that impede learning — the ones that flow from insecure relationships, constant movement and economic anxiety.

Attention has shifted toward the psychological for several reasons. First, it's become clear that social and emotional deficits can trump material or even intellectual progress. Schools in the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, are among the best college prep academies for disadvantaged kids. But, in its first survey a few years ago, KIPP discovered that three-quarters of its graduates were not making it through college. It wasn't the students with the lower high school grades that were dropping out most. It was the ones with the weakest resilience and social skills. It was the pessimists.

Second, over the past few years, an array of psychological researchers have taught us that motivation, self-control and resilience are together as important as raw IQ and are probably more malleable. Finally, pop culture has been far out front of policymakers in showing how social dysfunction can ruin lives.

Schools are now casting about, trying to find psychological programs that will help students work on resilience, equanimity and self-control. Some schools give two sets of grades — one for academic work and one for deportment.

And it's not just schools that are veering deeper into the psychological realms. Health care systems are going the same way, tracing obesity and self-destructive habits back to social breakdown and stress.

When you look over the domestic policy landscape, you see all these different people in different policy silos with different budgets: in health care, education, crime, poverty, social mobility and labor force issues. But, in their disjointed ways, they are all dealing with the same problem — that across vast stretches of America, economic, social and family breakdowns are producing enormous amounts of stress and unregulated behavior, which dulls motivation, undermines self-control and distorts lives.

Maybe it's time for people in all these different fields to get together in a room and make a concerted push against the psychological barriers to success.

Brooks is a columnist for The New York Times.



Europe's austerity demands are pointless



Paul Krugman says the truth is European protesters in Greece and Spain are right, and more and deeper austerity serves no useful purpose.

So much for complacency. Just a few days ago, the conventional wisdom was that Europe finally had things under control. The European Central Bank, by promising to buy the bonds of troubled governments if necessary, had soothed markets. All that debtor nations had to do, the story went, was agree to more and deeper austerity — the condition for central bank loans — and all would be well. But the purveyors of conventional wisdom forgot that people were involved. Suddenly, Spain and Greece are being racked by strikes and huge demonstrations.

The public in these countries is, in effect, saying that it has reached its limit: With unemployment at Great Depression levels and with erstwhile middle-class workers reduced to picking through garbage in search of food, austerity has already gone too far. And this means that there may not be a deal.

Much commentary suggests that the citizens of Spain and Greece are just delaying the inevitable, protesting against sacrifices that must, in fact, be made. But the truth is that the protesters are right. More austerity serves no useful purpose; the truly irrational players here are the allegedly serious politicians and officials demanding ever more pain. Consider Spain's woes. Basically, Spain is suffering the hangover from a huge housing bubble, which caused both an economic boom and a period of inflation that left Spanish industry uncompetitive with the rest of Europe. When the bubble burst, Spain was left with the difficult problem of regaining competitiveness, a painful process that will take years. Unless Spain leaves the euro it is condemned to years of high unemployment.

But this inevitable suffering is being magnified by harsh spending cuts; and these spending cuts are a case of inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting pain. Spain didn't get into trouble because its government was profligate. On the contrary, on the eve of the crisis, Spain actually had a budget surplus and low debt. Large deficits emerged when the economy tanked, taking revenues with it, but, even so, Spain doesn't appear to have all that high a debt burden.

It's true that Spain is now having trouble borrowing to finance its deficits. That trouble is, however, mainly

because of fears about the nation's broader difficulties — not least the fear of political turmoil in the face of very high unemployment. And shaving a few points off the budget deficit won't resolve those fears. In fact, research by the International Monetary Fund suggests that spending cuts in deeply depressed economies may actually reduce investor confidence because they accelerate the pace of economic decline.

Why, then, are there demands for ever more pain? Part of the explanation is that in Europe, as in America, far too many Very Serious People have been taken in by the cult of austerity, by the belief that budget deficits, not mass unemployment, are the clear and present danger, and that deficit reduction will somehow solve a problem brought on by private sector excess.

Beyond that, a significant part of public opinion in Europe's core — above all, in Germany — is deeply committed to a false view of the situation. Talk to German officials and they will portray the euro crisis as a morality play, a tale of countries that lived high and now face the inevitable reckoning. Never mind the fact that this isn't at all what happened — and the equally inconvenient fact that German banks played a large role in inflating Spain's housing bubble. Sin and its consequences are their story, and they're sticking to it.

Worse yet, this is also what many German voters believe, largely because it's what politicians have told them. And fear of a backlash from voters who believe, wrongly, that they're being put on the hook for the consequences of southern European irresponsibility leaves German politicians unwilling to approve essential emergency lending to Spain and other troubled nations unless the borrowers are punished first. Of course, that's not the way these demands are portrayed. But that's what it really comes down to. And it's long past time to put an end to this cruel nonsense.

If Germany really wants to save the euro, it should let the European Central Bank do what's necessary to rescue the debtor nations — and it should do so without demanding more pointless pain.

Krugman is a columnist for The New York Times.



Candid talk needed about Iran's increasing nuclear threat

Bipartisan group tackles questions affecting war, peace

By Edward P. Djerejian

The Iranian nuclear issue is one of the most important foreign and national security challenges the next president of the United States will confront. At stake are decisions of war and peace in a most volatile region in the world. And yet there has been little attention or serious debate focused on this issue in the current presidential campaign. In an effort to educate the public, a bipartisan group of former U.S. national security and foreign policy officials, of whom I am one, joined last week in signing a report titled "Weighing the Benefits and Costs of Military Action against Iran." As Abraham Lincoln said, "I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." Accordingly, here are some of the highlights of the report:

Signers of the report recognize that military action against Iran is being contemplated because a nuclear-armed Iran would pose dangerous challenges

to U.S. interests and security, as well as to the security of Israel. The danger that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons is real. Iran has twice in the past attempted to expand its nuclear program secretly — efforts that were detected and halted — and Iran is currently in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions requiring it to cease enrichment activities.

The United States has signaled that it is prepared to implement "all options," including the use of military force against Iran, should sanctions and diplomacy fail and if or when there is a clear indication that Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon. After deciding to "dash" for a bomb, Iran would need from one to four months to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear device.

Additional time — up to two years, according to conservative estimates — would be required for Iran to build a nuclear warhead that would be reliably deliverable by a missile. Given extensive monitoring and surveillance of Iranian activities, signs of an Iranian decision to build a nuclear weapon would likely be detected, and the United States would have at least a month to implement a course of action.

According to official statements, the objective of U.S. military action at that

point would be to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Military action would rely on aerial strikes supplemented by cyber attacks, covert operations and perhaps special operations forces.

However, according to the report, military attacks could significantly delay but not halt Iran's nuclear program. Extended military strikes by the United States alone or in concert with Israel could destroy or severely damage the six most important known nuclear facilities in Iran, setting back Iran's nuclear program for up to four years.

A military strike by Israel alone could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb for up to two years and Israel certainly could not replicate the success of its earlier surgical strikes against single reactors in Iraq and Syria, because of Iran's nuclear sites being widely dispersed, with one — Fordow — buried deep underground. If no lasting resolution of tensions over Iran's nuclear program can be achieved in the aftermath of U.S. and/or Israeli attacks, military action might need to be resumed at some future point.

The costs of a military option, including financial costs, would be substantial. Near-term costs are likely to include Iranian retaliation, both direct and through the actions of proxies. Long-term, U.S. interests could suffer from the

problematic consequences for global and regional stability, including economic stability, which could be endangered by interruptions of oil supplies. A dynamic of escalation, action and counteraction could also produce serious unintended consequences that would significantly increase all of these costs, both human and material, and lead, potentially, to all-out regional war.

The report points out that there is a marked lack of consensus and clarity in Washington about what the U.S. should aim to achieve through military action against Iran. Privately, some national security experts and advisers may have embraced the more modest objective of delaying Iran's ability to build a nuclear weapon as a step toward prevention; but some others may have embraced further objectives that are far broader than official statements currently suggest.

Given the high stakes involved, the time has come for our political leaders and representatives to engage with the American people in a candid and serious debate on this critical issue.

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