

A man with dark hair, wearing a white surgical face mask and a bright yellow puffer jacket, is looking down at a smartphone in his hands. He is standing outdoors in a park-like setting with bare trees and a large, light-colored building in the background. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

***Pandemics, Protests, and
Panic Attacks: A History
Defined by Tragedy***

FROM THE PANDEMIC POPULATION

TIM ELMORE

2020 by Tim Elmore

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Pandemics, Protests, and Panic Attacks: A History Defined by Tragedy

There is an age-old story that illustrates the state of millions of American teens today. It's the tale of a man who sat in a local diner waiting for his lunch. His countenance was down, he was feeling discouraged, and his tone was melancholy. When his waitress saw he was feeling low, she immediately suggested he go see Grimaldi. The circus was in town, and Grimaldi was a clown who made everyone laugh. The waitress was certain Grimaldi could cheer up her sad customer. Little did she know with whom she was speaking.

The man looked up at her and replied, "But, ma'am. I am Grimaldi."

In many ways, this is a picture of the Pandemic Population. On the outside, they're clowning around on Snapchat and TikTok, laughing at memes and making others laugh at filtered photos on social media. Inside, however, their mental health has gone south. It appears their life is a comedy, but in reality, it feels like a tragedy. They are mourning just how overwhelmed they feel—how behind they assume they are and how much they'll have to make up in order to catch up.

COMPLICATED AND COMPLEX

While our world has endured difficult eras in the past, including pandemics, world wars, famine and the like, the times in which we live are both complex and complicated. My colleague Steve Moore recently illustrated the difference between the two:

“Complicated” means a difficult situation stares you in the face. A student looking at a chalk board, trying to solve a math problem in class may find it complicated. Imagine, however, that student dozes off and naps for thirty minutes. When the student wakes up, the problem will still be there, but it will be unchanged. It is the same problem a half hour later. It’s not harder or easier to solve.

“Complex” means a difficult situation that is constantly evolving stares you in the face. An air traffic controller at a commercial airport, who’s helping planes take off and land, faces a tough challenge that doesn’t stay the same. If she wakes up after a thirty-minute nap in the air tower, problems have gotten worse. What may have been complicated a half hour ago has now also become complex. It’s a much tougher situation to solve.

The world that today’s young people grow up in is both *complex* and *complicated*. It’s a moving target, begging them to become both *resilient* and *resourceful*. And these two terms describe the meta-competencies they will need to thrive in the future. More on that later.

Our culture is anxious and the social world is marked by

- A rapid rate of change, often times fundamental change
- Complicated circumstances with multiple stakeholders
- An ever-critical public eye that spots and posts every flaw
- A virus that became a pandemic and shut everything down
- A more educated populace who feels empowered by data
- Convoluted and nuanced interactions that are scrutinized constantly
- A fear of failing and an anxiety about the judgments of others around us

Generation Z represents the population of young people who have no memories of the twentieth century, which millennials do have. Generation Z grew up in the twenty-first century when the world was different. While millennials grew up with cell phones, Generation Z grew up with smart phones. While millennials grew up with on-demand music on an iPod, Generation Z grew up with on-demand everything—almost every song, video, TV program, and movie is now “on demand.” And while millennials are marked by September 11, 2001 as a tragic “rite of passage,” Generation Z has endured daily, ongoing tragedies (i.e. mass shootings) capped off by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 9/11 tragedy was horrific, but it took place in specific locations (New York City or Washington DC), on a particular day that we could visit and grieve. (In fact, there is now a memorial at Ground Zero in Manhattan.) The coronavirus, on the other hand, has been a slow, sinister infection that has migrated around the world to multiple locations, stealing jobs and lives along the way. As the pandemic has taken its toll, one of the unexpected consequences was the cost to mental health. The effects of these difficult realities on Generation Z, which I am about to go over in detail, have been particularly impactful on a subset of this generation. These are the kids, young adults caught in a time of transition, who I now call the “Pandemic Population.”

LIFE SINCE THE PANDEMIC POPULATION WAS BORN

Reflect with me on the first two decades of the twenty-first century. History pivoted as our world moved into a new millennium. Our world had already become complicated, and now it was becoming more complex as the final chapter of the 1990s concluded and we entered the year 2000. Walk with me down memory lane.

We began with the Y2K bug. This was a computer flaw many predicted would cause problems for hundreds of millions of people when dealing with dates beyond December 31, 1999. This Millennium bug led to a widespread scare, causing folks to buy food and water to stash away. When complex computer programs were first written in the 1960s, engineers used a two-digit code for the year, leaving out “19.” As the year 2000 approached, many felt systems would not interpret “00” correctly, causing a glitch in communication. While the solution was a simple fix to a four-digit number, Y2K revealed just how vulnerable people are to apocalyptic fears.

Next, there was the dot-com era bubble burst. By the end of the 1990s, many start-ups were launched by e-commerce entrepreneurs: their company was a store on a website, and their customers shopped online. During the dot-com bubble, the value of equity markets grew exponentially, with the technology-dominated Nasdaq index rising from under 1,000 to more than 5,000 between the years 1995 and 2000. In 2001 and 2002, the bubble burst, with equities entering a bear market. In the financial downturn, thousands lost jobs, money, and market share as companies went belly-up.

Next, we experienced a terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 that hit closer to home than any intrusion we’d ever experienced. Nineteen foreign terrorists hijacked jets over domestic soil and killed 2,974 people in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania. It was the deadliest attack in our history. But it was only the beginning. After 9/11, our world experienced over 110,041 terrorist attacks between 2001 and 2017.¹ In the last decade, terrorists killed an average of 21,000 people worldwide each year,² creating a fearful culture for people in general and particularly for parents. The events of 9/11 sent us into an economic spiral, with both companies and nonprofit organizations going out of business.

Then, we witnessed a swelling number of scandals among large corporations, like Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom—companies millions had grown to trust and do business with. Each of these corporations had core values hanging on their walls that included “integrity” and “trust,” but failed to practice them. We discovered that what’s hanging on the wall is not nearly as important as what’s happening down the hall, as my friend Andy Stanley likes to say.³ Greed coerced leaders to hide poor decisions and bad transactions. Wall Street was perceived as corrupt, and this led to tighter legislation for businesses.

Next, we experienced the introduction of the smart phone, with iPhones and androids. At first these portable devices were marvels of entertainment and productivity, but over time, we began to experience both the addictive nature of these devices and the anxiety they foster: fear of missing out (FOMO), fear of being offline (FOBO) and fear of messing up (FOMU). Phones became essential yet they brought mental health consequences. A friend of mine once pointed out in conversation, when our phones had leashes, we were free. Now our phones are free, and we have leashes.⁴

Because most of us owned a smart phone, we next experienced the ubiquitous presence of social media. First, we added MySpace, then Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and countless others. Over the last several years, more of them use images that disappear quickly, such as Snapchat and TikTok. Once again, the negative nature of social media surfaced when stories emerged about stalkers communicating with children and companies tracking our activity. More of us, even kids, have begun to prefer privacy and exclusivity with our posts. A typical teen has an Instagram account, but several “finsta” accounts (fake Instagram personas).

We also experienced the Great Recession of 2008 to 2009, which we were unprepared for. This financial downturn spawned the worst economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and it was the second downturn of the decade. The result? It devastated world financial markets as well as the banking and real-estate industries. The crisis led to increases in home-mortgage foreclosures worldwide and caused millions of people to lose their life savings, jobs, and homes. For many, it took years to recover, and some still have not.

Then, there were disputes against social injustice in the United States. Over the last decade, people have protested racial inequities, as people took sides on police brutality issues (#blacklivesmatter), gay and lesbian marriage rights (#lgbtrights), gun control issues (#marchforourlives), women's rights and sexual assault (#metoo)—all of which became movements in addition to topics for social media. Teenager Greta Thunberg became a spokesperson for global warming (#climatechange) as millions from Generation Z expressed confusion over why older adults failed to see the urgent problem. Regardless of where people stand on these issues, the interconnectedness of our world and the all-pervasiveness of social media makes these topics impossible to ignore.

The normalization of student loans became headline news as college tuition debt grew larger than credit card debt in the United States.⁵ Millions of millennials still carry thousands of dollars of debt as they proceed through their careers, causing them to choose jobs merely because of the paycheck and not because of their giftedness or calling. As of 2019, college-tuition debt in America stood at \$1.5 trillion and 42 million Americans carry part of that load, about one person in six.⁶

Next, we saw an increase in mass shootings in America. A mass shooting is defined as a shooting where four or more people are injured or killed.⁷ In 2019, there were more mass shootings in the United States (417) than we had days in the year,⁸ sparking a new debate on gun control and mental health. In a 2020 focus group I hosted, students in Atlanta acknowledged that whenever they hear a loud noise (like a pop) on campus, they duck. They're worried it's a gun going off. It has become normalized in the minds of teens today. And it has become another source of anxiety and panic attacks in America's youth.

In time, we witnessed the normalization of addictions in American life. From vaping to video games, pornography, social media, opioids, and other prescription drugs, many Americans found such coping mechanisms enabled them to endure their pain and anxiety. In fact, the twenty-first century became the period when legal addictions overtook illegal addictions⁹ and addictive behavior became a growing topic among behavioral scientists. Most stunning of all, those struggling with addictions are often highly intelligent and educated professionals, meaning it isn't an intellectual issue but is likely an emotional one.

Along with these came political polarization. After having our first minority president, Barack Obama, we got the first complete outsider president—Donald Trump. These two men have very different approaches to leadership and politics. It was as though the political pendulum swung from one ideology to the other, where incredible gains were made for progressives first, followed by an equally incredible reaction from conservatives. As a kid, I remember Republicans and Democrats finding a way to work together in the 1970s. Today that seems unimaginable.

Mental health issues have reached epic proportions among Americans, especially young people. Once again, it is the normalization of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. Anxiety is the most common mental-health disorder in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.¹⁰ “In its annual survey of students, the American College Health Association found a significant increase—to 62 percent in 2016 from 50 percent in 2011—of undergraduates reporting overwhelming anxiety’ in the previous year.”¹¹ Simultaneously, suicide attempts and completions also skyrocketed, causing US life expectancy to drop for the first time in decades.

Finally, there was the coronavirus that sent us all home from work and school for months. By July 30, 2020, more than 17,000,000 were infected and 600,000 died around the world. A record 6.6 million Americans applied for unemployment in one week.¹³ By March 2020, no one questioned whether we'd be talking about this pandemic for generations.

The only debate is—what do we compare it to? The 2008 financial crisis? September 11, 2001? World War II? As millions of people applied for unemployment in one week, some economists predicted it would compare to the Great Depression when unemployment hit 25 percent in America. In April 2020, the US unemployment rate jumped to nearly 15 percent (up from only 3.5 percent four months earlier) as 20.5 million people abruptly lost their jobs, according to the Labor Dept. By May 2020, half of the US population was not working.¹⁴ It was a time of deep loss and poverty as we fought to recover from the global outbreak.

Finally, another season of protests crept up on all of us. After three murder cases made national news—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, all unarmed black Americans who were killed by law-enforcement (or former) officers—our nation hit the streets in protest in major cities all over the country. Millions of people, many from Generation Z, protested racial injustice and specifically police brutality. While some of the protests turned violent, the damage and looting was mostly conducted by the hands of agitators and not genuine protestors. The protests went on daily for weeks and often police officers took a knee with protestors, joining hands with them and amplifying the message. While the scope was reminiscent of the 1960s protests, the unity between people was different than anything I'd seen before. Generation Z witnessed or participated in this firsthand.

What other notable factors have contributed to today's culture?

HOW EACH GENERATION MIGHT RESPOND TO OUR CURRENT CRISIS

Clearly, no individual can speak for their entire generation. Each of us are unique and possesses our own narrative on what's happening. But generations are defined by shared experiences, shared music, shared heroes, shared television programs, shared tragedies, shared economies, and shared moments. With that in mind, allow me to suggest what each generation might say if they could speak as a single person in response to the 2020 pandemic.

Silent Generation: “We’ve been through tough times before.” *(not rattled)*

These are senior citizens, the Silent Generation, born between 1929 and 1945. They’re made up of people who survived the Great Depression and World War II. They feel they’ve seen it all and are now in their twilight years. They are not deeply rattled by COVID-19, unless they’ve been infected. My dad is a great example. Since he had invested in his retirement and is “sheltering in place”—just like he was before the nationwide quarantine.

Baby Boomers: “My retirement is disappearing.” *(rattled)*

These are the retiring or recently retired generation, who are seasoned veterans and now worry more about how they’ll live on what they have saved. Less than half have reported saving enough to maintain their standard of living.¹⁵ They are rattled because of this suboptimal reality, as well as because they’re more vulnerable to the coronavirus.

Generation X: “Life is hard; steady as she goes.” *(rattled a bit more)*

Generation X (or the baby busters) are the smaller generation following the baby boomers whose generation launched with the introduction of the birth-control pill. All their lives, they’ve lived in the shadow of the boomers who are entering retirement age at a rate of 10,000 per day. Now they are in management and less worried about losing a job than a young professional. They know life is tough but still might feel vulnerable.

Millennials: “What will this do to my dreams?” *(rattled even more)*

These young professionals in their 20s and 30s were caught between two economic downturns, one decade apart: the Great Recession (2008–2009) and the COVID-19 recession we’re now experiencing. Because they grew up at a time when parents prized and praised them with trophies and accolades, this is a challenging time. The launch of their career has been far more difficult than any video game they played as a kid.

Generation Z – “I feel postponed and penalized.” *(rattled a lot)*

The youngest generation was already fraught with mental health issues and now has one more reason to feel angst and worry about the world. They grew up feeling overwhelmed by the thousands of social media posts they consume each day and now feel uncertain about their future prospects for internships, jobs, financial independence, and home ownership. Oh and not to mention, their personal physical and emotional health.

It’s difficult to imagine what it would feel like to be an adolescent today—a high school or college student who’s coming of age at a time when even the adults are divided about how to handle the virus and when to return to work and are unable to make any predictions for their future. What I do believe, however, is that past generations who survived and even thrived after a global tragedy, be it a world war, a famine, or a pandemic, did so because they were guided well by their leaders and instilled with hope, belief, and grit.

This is our challenge today.

DID WE BUILD SNOWFLAKES OR SNOWMEN?

Some of my colleagues have concluded: *Well, the Coronavirus is bad, but we've been through bad experiences before. Tragedies strike in nearly every generation as they grow up.* While this is true, today is different because adults may not have done an adequate job of building grit and resilience in the emerging generation. Let's face it, most of us find it difficult to delay gratification, to work hard at something when we see no quick return, to receive hard feedback from others, or to bounce back when we've failed. Our world is "on demand" and "instant access," and has produced "Google reflexes," where Alexa or Siri immediately respond to our requests. As I meet over ten thousand parents at events each year, I wonder if we're part of our kids' problem.

For years, journalists, educators, and employers described Generation Z in America as a "snowflake generation." Why? Because so many of these kids have been raised in a delicate, soft environment protected from life's harsh realities and responsibilities. Some even wrote that we've coddled them, protecting them with bubble wrap.

The term *snowflake* has been used to refer to children raised by their parents in ways that give them an inflated sense of their own uniqueness. Initially, the term *snowflake generation* was mere slang, but was soon listed as one of *Collins Dictionary's* 2016 words of the year. *Collins* defines the term as "the young adults of the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offense than previous generations".¹⁶ Later the *Financial Times* included *snowflake* in their annual Year in a Word list, defining it as "a derogatory term for someone deemed too emotionally vulnerable to cope with views that challenge their own, particularly in universities and other forums once known for robust debate."¹⁷

HOW AND WHY DID THESE SNOWFLAKES APPEAR?

Helicopter Parents

These are the parents we've read about since 2002, who hover over their children, ensuring they get all the benefits they deserve. More than thirty years ago, parenting styles began to shift. Moms and dads became preoccupied with the safety, status, and self-esteem of their kids. As this parenting population grew, culture began to reflect their sentiments: Baby on Board signs in the back of the minivan, thousands of new parenting and self-help books, and child-safety rules displayed in parks and daycare centers. In the name of "helping our kids," parents did their child's homework, hovered over them at soccer practice, and joined their graduate at his first job interview. I would say in some places, the "helicopter" has become an "apache helicopter."

Participation Ribbons and Trophies

Eventually, youth sports leagues felt it was important to celebrate participation more than wins. It was understandable. Most kids won't win a championship, and adults felt that should not prevent those average players from being rewarded in some way. A few years ago, I visited a friend's home and saw his child's room filled with trophies and ribbons his child had been given. He had never won any championships. Celebrating participation has fostered an expectation of rewards just for showing up. It did not prepare kids for the world that awaits them.

Grade Inflation

Student's grades have been on the rise for over forty years—not so much because they are smarter than children decades ago, but because grades have been inflated by schools. In the 1960s, the average grade given was a C. Why? Because C means average. Today, the average grade is an A. Many adults fear students cannot handle the harsh reality of a C. I spoke in one school district where faculty told me they were not allowed to use red ink when grading papers because it was too harsh. Some told me they were not permitted to use the word "no" because it was too negative.

Virtual Realities and Prescribed Activity

Instead of making teens work jobs, we got them involved with recitals, practices and games—all supervised and prescribed by adults of course. While piano, ballet, and sports can begin to cultivate personal discipline, these activities are still virtual realities, only a facsimile of the real world. The stakes aren't real. When a teen says they want to do something that actually matters, adults place them in a supervised program that emulates the real world. It's all controlled by adult leaders, which fosters dependency and reduces ownership. We conditioned them to need us, and now we laugh at them for bringing mom to the job interview.

Technology and the Media

As this generation grew up over the last twenty years, portable devices and social media took over. Kids today are exposed to thousands of images each day, often causing them to feel jealous over what friends are doing (having seen their Instagram posts) and believing everyone deserves the latest smart device, the latest Madewell jeans, the latest Xbox, the latest Nike shoes, and a subscription to Netflix. Entitlement and materialism usually walk hand in hand.

Safe Places in College

As students enter college, they begin to clamor for safe places, free from opposition or harsh feedback. This came to light in a confrontation between Yale University students and the faculty head of college, Nicholas Christakis. The confrontation arose after Christakis' wife, Erika, a university lecturer, suggested students should “relax a bit rather than labeling fancy dress Halloween costumes as culturally insensitive.” This sparked a “screaming, almost hysterical mob of students.”¹⁸ Even if their views are right, the answer isn't always to remove opposition. It's to know how to handle it.

On top of all of this, today we live in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept the world off of its feet, just when these same young adults were coming of age. When teens look to their parents, teachers, coaches, or employers, they see an adult population uncertain about how to handle the situation because we've never faced it before either. We've often led with fearful paradigms and scarcity mindsets, which further deepens the angst of Generation Z. It's a perfect storm of external and internal forces that have put us all in a vulnerable mental state.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

In the end, far too often these “snowflakes” are products of our making. Not seeing what was happening soon enough, parents, teachers and other adults forgot that raising children is not just about *protecting* but is also about *preparing*. We wouldn't let them fail. We removed the consequences of poor decisions. We praised the wrong qualities in them. We risked too little, we rescued too quickly, and we raved too easily.¹⁹ As they came of age and should have been ready to enter adulthood—more educated and with greater advantages than past generations—a mammoth percentage moved home after graduation. A 2010 study revealed that a full one-third of American males between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-four still lived at home with their parents.²⁰ While the challenge involves all genders, our males have been the greatest victims of this tragedy. They often remained boys when it was time to become men. For instance, while males and females both move home after college, the women often return home with a plan. The men usually return home with no plan at all. Their *Call of Duty* video game becomes a stand-in for real life success, and Mom is often far too willing to cook, clean, and cater to them.

In this unique period in history, we must develop grit and resilience in Generation Z and particularly this subset among this generation whom we call the Pandemic Population.

So, let's talk about how we get started.

End Notes

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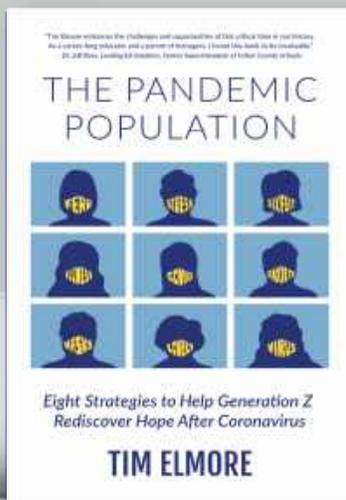
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As a career-long educator and a parent of teenagers, I found this book to be invaluable.

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The Pandemic Population

Eight Strategies to Help Generation Z Rediscover Hope After Coronavirus

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Dr. Tim Elmore is a best-selling author and international speaker who equips the educators, coaches, leaders, and parents of Generations Y and Z. He has trained thousands of leaders in nationally-renowned organizations and authored more than 30 books including *Generation Z Unfiltered*, *Habitudes: Images that Form Leadership Habits and Attitudes*, *Marching Off the Map*, *Generation iY* and more.

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