

Decision-making in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mag/Min as a Guide (2020)

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic presents everyone across the globe with the challenge to make decisions continually. This decision-making challenge is especially acute because: a) the risks are about the outcomes of life and death, and b) because the situation changes frequently, sometimes daily, requiring reassessment of previous decisions.

Unlike other pressing decisions for people, the current ones about the virus are the same ones for everyone across the globe. Everyone is dealing with the same virus, and at the same time. It is an ironic shared moment in history. Our connectedness to one another is revealed in the maps of the spread of this very contagious virus. The virus is a living system for which we as humans, connected around the world, provide the hosting. We are part of nature. The virus needs us.

Systems theory

I am a family systems therapist and have based my practice, teaching and writing, in systems theory. It has served me well as a source of explanation for understanding people and their relationships, and it has provided the basis for practical behaviors to help people solve problems.

The basic assumption that systems theory operates from is very simply that everything is connected, everything; nothing is not connected. This perspective of universal connectedness certainly seems like a good fit for explaining the current situation of this global pandemic. The specific systems theory that forms the foundation for all that I do is Bowen theory.

Bowen theory

Bowen theory is a theory of human behavior that works from an assumption that human beings operate fundamentally as living systems like the rest of nature. Dr. Bowen postulated that the self of the human is a function of the dynamics of many systems, especially the family, and that the effectiveness of the human's behavior is determined by how well he/she responds to anxiety. Bowen understood anxiety as a phenomenon that exists in the system, in the set of relationships that compose it, as well as in individuals.

He described the self in his concept of Differentiation as how well a person can maintain their self in the face of the forces and dynamics of the system. He scaled this self from a level of low differentiation to a higher level, which characterizes a more mature person, as it indicates an increased ability to manage anxiety. The primary determinant of this level is the extent to which a person's behavior is based more on their emotional reactions, or more on their cognitive processes. Higher levels reflect an ability to adapt to situations and make decisions based more on thoughtful consideration of options. A lower level reflects decisions that are more automatic, like a reflex, and are made more from a narrow repertoire of options.

This describes the dynamics for one person. Then, as people interact, they create patterns of interaction as each person maintains their level of differentiation in coordination with others. Over time these patterns of interaction become part of determining the general level of functioning of that system, be it a family, a community or an organization.

Based on Bowen theory, I have developed a framework, Mag/Min, to further develop the concept of the self by incorporating language. In this framework, the level of differentiation can be understood as the extent of emotional distortion in one's use of language, both in one's individual thinking and in one's interactions with others. While soundly based in

theory, the framework is also very intuitive and practical as it provides a structure for decision-making.

Magnify/Minify

Specifically, this framework posits that people make decisions from two different and opposite assumptions, and that these assumptions drive basically all the decisions a person makes. And further, to the extent that they become patterns, those patterns define the self, who the person is. Those two assumptions are either: a) whatever I decide it will most likely work out, or if it doesn't, it doesn't matter; or b) whatever I decide it will most likely not work out, and that will be a problem. I have named the former decision-maker the Magnifier, because they magnify the likelihood of a positive outcome, and the latter, the Minifier (a real word), because they minify the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Mag/Min assumptions are expressed in language in one's thinking and in one's talking. I plot them on a continuum with the extremes being on either end, with the highest level of functioning in the middle. People can change as they move toward the middle from whichever side they operate from, Mag or Min, by how they use language. Mags change as they think and talk more in terms of accepting limits, and Mins as they think and talk more in terms of possibilities.

Pandemic decisions

Now I want to apply this decision-making framework of Magnifier/Minifier to the decisions people have to make continually in this era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As people have to make decisions these days about how to respond to the virus pandemic, the question becomes how to make the best ones over the course of this crisis. The best decisions could be defined as those that lead to the most effective behaviors that keep the individual healthy by not contracting the virus, and keep others from getting sick by not spreading

the virus. Then, from the larger perspective, good individual decisions can lead to an overall reduction of the infection in the population at large.

My Mag/Min framework provides a very useful way to understand how people make decisions and then behave, as well as a way to help people make good decisions. It also is designed to help people change the pattern of their decision-making, so that their self actually changes and life improves. This is how a person could actually use this crisis for personal growth.

Using the Mag/Min framework presented above, one could say that the Magnifier would make decisions in this crisis from an assumption that generally the risks are not that high, and eventually daily life will return to normal with no significant, adverse long-term effects. The Minifier would make decisions in this crisis from an assumption that generally the risks are high, and daily life will probably not return to normal, and there will be significant and adverse long-term effects.

At the extremes of lower functioning, the Magnifier would ignore guidelines for safe health practices established by medical experts, and the Minifier would obsess about those practices and severely limit their daily functioning. These are more extreme responses to the anxiety generated by the threat of the pandemic, present in individuals, and in the relationships of various systems ranging from family to community to society and to the global world.

However, using Bowen theory, it is possible to consider alternative responses to the anxiety. This would mean controlling the automatic response of a decision based in emotional functioning and relying more on cognitive functioning. Better decisions would be ones that are based on a more rational assessment of the risks and possible outcomes.

But it is critical to understand that making better decisions is different and opposite for the Magnifier and the Minifier. From the extreme ends of the

continuum, Mag and Min dynamics would determine decisions made primarily as a reflex to the anxiety. The Mag would automatically make decisions that minimize the risk in an attempt to relieve the anxiety about the threat (no worry). The Min would automatically make decisions that maximize the risk in an attempt to relieve the anxiety about the threat (it's hopeless anyway; nothing you can do).

At higher levels of differentiation, more toward the middle of the continuum, the Mag would allow some anxiety in order to consider the possible risks and not automatically decide to ignore them. At higher levels of differentiation, the Min would allow some anxiety in order to consider the possible risks and not automatically decide to embrace them.

This is how this pandemic crisis can actually provide an opportunity for a change for the better in individual functioning and in society as a whole. Crises can prompt changes that prove beneficial in the long run.

What does this look like concretely as individual people deal with the pandemic today? For a Magnifier, this would mean considering the possibility of a negative outcome, and the need to limit one's actions, with a more thoughtful assessment of the risks. With the stay-at-home directives in place in many places, the Mag needs to consider the risks of going out and possibly contracting the virus or infecting others, depending on the need to go out.

In terms of one's general assumptions, the Mag needs to consider his/her vulnerability to contracting the virus and surviving, rather than automatically assuming one is immune and so it cannot happen to me. Another general assumption to consider is how one will survive the financial impact of this pandemic. Does the Mag just assume I will be okay, or do they consider the possibility it will not work out so well, and they need to plan for that possible outcome?

For a Minifier it means considering the possibility of a positive outcome, while taking actions that are not unnecessarily limited, with a more thoughtful assessment of the risks. With the stay-at-home directives, the Min needs to consider the possibility of going out safely for necessary tasks without isolating oneself unnecessarily

In terms of general assumptions, the Min needs to consider his/her vulnerability to contracting the virus and surviving, rather than automatically assuming one will inevitably catch the virus and cannot trust one's immune system at all.

The other general assumption to consider is the eventual outcome of the pandemic and how one will survive the financial impact of this pandemic. Does the Min just assume I will be not be okay financially, or do they consider the possibility it may work out well as life will be different, but better, and they need to plan for that possible outcome?

In all of these situations, change can happen as Mags and Mins first consider the less habitual, automatic response in their thinking, and then experiment with different behaviors based on alternative options. Then the process repeats as they reflect afterward on the outcome of their decisions, experiment more with behaviors, and reflect again. Talking with others about what they are doing and why, is also part of this cycling process as the system responds to their changes. Over time this continual recursion is how the self changes within the system.

Leaders

These are all options for decisions made by individuals. What does this look like concretely as leaders deal with the pandemic today?

One of the later concepts Dr. Bowen developed as part of his theory was Societal Process. The idea is take the basic concept of Differentiation of self as described above, which involves the individual's monitoring their automatic responses to anxiety enough to be able to engage their cognitive

functioning, and apply this concept to leaders in society. The assumption is that the higher the level of differentiation of the leader, the higher the functioning of the system they lead.

Now take my previous proposal about using Mag/Min as a guide for individuals making decisions about managing self in this crisis of the COVID-19 crisis, and apply it to current leaders in the world. That means that leaders, first of all, need to know if they are Magnifier or Minifier, and then need to make decisions as leaders that allow more consideration of limitations (Mag), or more consideration of possibilities (Min). The more the leader from either side can allow this greater consideration of alternatives that deviate from their habitual pattern, the less their decisions will be driven by emotions in themselves and in the people they lead. These more rationally-based decisions will draw from a larger range of options, and consequently, provide more opportunities for the people they lead to adapt to the crisis.

And so, the more the leaders can raise their own level of differentiation, the more the systems they lead can function at a higher level, which can ultimately contribute to an improvement in how society functions.

People can learn from this crisis and figure out ways to adapt to it that can become permanent changes. It is of course also possible that the threat creates so much anxiety, that it overwhelms people and we end up worse off than where we began before the crisis. That would happen if people continually make emotionally-based decisions as individuals and as leaders. So the responses to this pandemic crisis can result in regression or change.

Conclusion

In sum, this COVID-19 crisis presents both individuals and leaders with the challenge to make decisions that have immediate as well as long-term consequences which can be positive or negative. This article posits that the

more emotionally-based the decisions are, the more likely the outcomes will be negative. This is because they will be based on a more immediate attempt to relieve the anxiety, and not on a broader assessment of the risks and options for an effective response to the threat.

If, over the course of the crisis the predominant pattern of decision-making is emotionally based, one could predict that the negative outcomes may become permanent for the individuals in their lives and in society as a whole, because the system may stabilize around this regressed level of lower functioning.

However, with a pattern of more thoughtful decisions, made from a higher level of differentiation, the opposite is possible. As the crisis winds down, individuals, as well as society, could actually emerge with a higher level of functioning. This can happen with a disciplined effort on the part of individuals and leaders to change how they make decisions. My Mag/Min framework provides a specific way to change those patterns, and thereby leverage powerful, systemic change in the lives of individual people and the population at large.

Resources

For Bowen theory:

The Bowen Center

<http://thebowncenter.org>

For Magnify/Minify:

www.tschur.com