



FITNESS
 TRAINING FOR THE
 VUCA AGE:
 DEALING WITH
 FEAR CON-

STRUC- TIVELY



Most people react to crisis situations with fear. But a society dominated by fears of losing control isn't going to be very well prepared for the VUCA world of the future, warns Karin Maria Schertler. The VUCA expert knows how to overcome our fears and emerge from crises stronger than ever.

KEINE ANGST!

F E A R

If you are a certain age, then it will come as no surprise to you to hear that the biggest leaps forward always happen when – whether voluntarily or involuntarily – you leave your comfort zone. The more intense the crisis you overcome, the more you develop as a person. And another thing that life teaches us is that these steps forward usually involve some kind of pain. This applies to children (childhood illness, puberty), adults (defeats, strokes of fate) and societies (climate change, financial crisis, coronavirus pandemic) in equal measure.

As we all know, everyone reacts differently to crises. Some resort to denial, sweeping everything under the rug. Others allow themselves to become paralysed by powerlessness and helplessness. And many people rush headlong into pointless busy work. All different strategies that have shaped us in our early years and with which we are more or less subconsciously trying to gain control of something that is well beyond our reach.

THE COMMON PATTERN: FEAR

On closer inspection, we can see that a lot of these response patterns have a common denominator: they are all driven by fear. And if we are really honest with ourselves – we all have a fear of losing control.

At the same time, we should recognise that we are living in a time in which we have less and less control. There's a reason why this era is being referred to in the same breath as VUCA: it is volatile (a constant up and down), uncertain (we cannot rely on anything anymore), complex (what worked yesterday may be useless today) and ambivalent (the two sides of a coin contradict each other or have conflicting effects).

The conclusion we can draw from this is that a society shaped by fears of losing control isn't going to be particularly well prepared for a VUCA future.

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS FEAR

Fear itself is not the problem: it is just as much a part of life as everything else and isn't necessarily a bad thing in itself. In certain situations it can even be useful and protect us, as long as it spurs us on to take action rather than rooting us to the spot. It only becomes fatal if we are not in touch with our fears because that's when they unconsciously influence all our thoughts and actions (so much for self-determination!). And even if we are in touch with them, it takes certain skills to be able to deal with them constructively – but unfortunately this is something that we rarely learn at home or school.

If we don't learn how to deal with our own fears constructively, then the best version of ourselves will be obscured and our future present largely defined by our past present. Although unaware of it, we are experiencing repetition repeating itself in the most diversely nuanced of colours. There's a reason why the favourite question of Miriam Meckel, publisher of *WirtschaftsWoche* and future magazine *ada*, is: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

But seasoned experts are far better than I am at describing or conveying what this specific skillset is like and how to acquire it (see for example: Klaus Eidenschink: "Ängste? Erläuterungen zu einem aktuellen Gefühl" <https://metatheorie-der-veraenderung.info/2020/03/18/aengste/>). What interests me much more in a VUCA context is how can we, as a collective, succeed in acquiring a constructive approach to fear and, as a society, develop the best possible version of ourselves – and emerge even stronger from crises. So that, looking back, we can say: the process was involuntary, we had to leave our comfort zone in many respects and it was daunting and painful at times – but it was worth it. Together we have developed in leaps and bounds because we are looking to ourselves, life and the future with confidence.

OUR COUNTRY NEEDS A POSITIVE NARRATIVE

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy: our attitude influences our perception and also has a direct influence on reality as we experience it. If, within this context, we consider that fears are always individual and that they significantly affect the way we think and act, then it quickly becomes clear that – without realising it – we are severely limiting our future potential. After all, the likelihood that our currently acute fears will be confirmed in the future present is high.

And so the need for positive narratives that represent a conscious contrast to the inner narratives fuelled by our fears cannot be valued highly enough, especially in the VUCA era. It's not only collective social distancing that is the order of the day, but collective fear distancing as well.

A LOOK BACK AT THE PRESENT

Using the RE-gnosis device (as opposed to PRO-gnosis), I would even hazard a look back at today – in the hope of motivating others to come up with further positive future narratives.

Looking back to the present from the future, we can see that our fears of an economic collapse due to the many crises that are plaguing us were unfounded. While there is no denying that the economy looks a lot different than it did in the past decade, there are positive sides to all of this as well.

Smaller and local suppliers are emerging from the crisis stronger, heightening a regional sense of belonging and responsibility – and, in turn, social cohesion as well. Consumption has, in large swathes of society, become more responsible, along the lines of 'less is more'. And the great side effect of this is that we are making huge strides in terms of climate protection. Not to mention that working from home is no longer regarded as the death knell for a career. On the contrary: the rise in productivity we have experienced in 2020 – thanks to greater autonomy, less time wasted in traffic jams or on long journeys to work, and the professional use of digital collaboration tools – have convinced even the strongest opponents of the advantages of a trust-based corporate culture. A positive by-product of this is that the pressure is being taken off congested urban areas while previously disconnected regions are gaining new momentum – because, in

many industries, geographical proximity is no longer essential for value creation.

The many crises have also given an incredible boost to innovation. Not only in existing organisations and administrations, but also among many private individuals. The loss of income, the solidarity that we are experiencing together and the opportunities of the digital economy have made many people resourceful in times of need. And so they have taken to coming up with better ideas rather than letting idiotic TV shows or irrelevant social media chitchat wash over them. After all, many of us have also realised that we need to tackle our future ourselves head on, rather than leaving it in the hands of the politicians alone.

We are also astonished to discover that our fears of the German healthcare system collapsing under the strain of horrendous cost increases were unjustified. This was because the coronavirus crisis shocked a lot of people into taking more responsibility for their own health. Loosely based on John F. Kennedy's legendary words: "Ask not what your doctor can do for your health, but what you can do for your own health to help take the strain off the collective healthcare system." We now also find it hard to imagine that we once allowed ourselves to be exposed to so much 'crap'. For some it was meat contaminated with antibiotics and a permanent overdose of sugar, while for others it was the constant loop of negative thoughts and repressed emotional blocks that made them ill.

And many people have taken to completely redefining the terms 'investment' and 'retirement planning'. Instead of only investing in 'others' (stocks and shares, government bonds, companies) like we did in the past, it has become the new normal to also invest in ourselves. It's not only plenty of exercise, enough sleep and a healthy diet that have become the new standard, but also coaching and lifelong learning. And surprising for many, diseases like diabetes, dementia, depression and many more are declining as a result and therefore significantly reducing the strain on health budgets.

#REINVENTINGSOCIETY

As you can see, it all comes down to #ReinventingSociety (inspired by the New Work bible 'Reinventing Organisations', whose title has since become one of the catchphrases of the movement).

It is also crystal clear that #ReinventingSociety is a mammoth task and that success is by no means a given. Each and every one of us will need to play our part on all levels – starting with ourselves. But before our fears take over again and have us wracked with doubt and shaking our heads in disbelief at how naive we had been, let me leave you with the following question: how many butterflies would there be if caterpillars had the same fears as us humans in the year 2021?

HOW MANY BUTTERFLIES WOULD THERE BE IF CATERPILLARS HAD THE SAME FEARS AS US HUMANS IN THE YEAR 2021?

