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## Chapter 6

### Moral Education and Post-COVID-19: Two New Normals

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#### ABSTRACT

A new normal is a state of being that an economy, society, or other social construction settles into following a crisis, when the circumstances are different than those that prevailed prior to the start of the crisis (World Economic Forum, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic can be considered such a crisis. The term “new normal” is being used today to reflect the uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus (Balakrishnan, 2022). I propose that there are actually two new normals: the first is the one we are living in now, created by the onset of the pandemic; the second is the future one that will take effect after the virus is well under control worldwide with the future availability of a cure and vaccine still a grey area, everyone from academics, politicians, media to families and individuals have found their thoughts and way of living to be continually under the influence of the first new normal. Many are hoping that one day we will all confidently just go back to our normal life, but people in countries such as Japan have already come to accept the fact that the coronavirus is here to stay to some degree and they must co-exist with it in the second new normal. In this chapter, I try to bring to light the new lifestyles that have been and will be adopted by people in Eastern societies because of these two new normals, and how the norms that define them may clash with the needs of the people in these societies at the time. I present and discuss two case studies to illustrate my points, and I end by discussing the challenges and opportunities for Moral Education in the second new-normal society. The chapter should help to shape and reinforce readers’ understanding of the world and the ways we choose to approach a new normal.

**KEYWORDS:** new normal, reality, idealism

## INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, the COVID-19 virus was identified for the first time in Wuhan, China, where it affected many aspects of people's growth and development (Balakrishnan, 2022) The new normal of the current COVID-19 era is filled with uncertainty and challenges, yet it brings us hope and inspiration to go on with life in a possible second new normal once vaccines are widely available and all human beings are as safe from severe symptoms or death from the COVID-19 virus as they are from the common flu. According to Buheji and Buheji (2020), many components in life will change in the second new normal. It will likely be an era of agility, curiosity, risk mitigation, focus, learning by exploring, and learning by doing.

Before COVID-19 came into the global picture, there were other pandemics, specifically the 1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus), the 1957-1958 Pandemic (H2N2 virus), the 1968 Pandemic (H3N2 virus), and the 2009 Pandemic (H1N pdm09virus). History has shown that after every one of these pandemics, all the affected societies returned to their normal state of being on earth. People might have lost their loved ones, their jobs, their wealth, and their health, but they slowly returned to the old way of life. In the case of COVID-19, only time will tell.

According to Popa (2020), in the future there will be a need to remember the unmanageable and overwhelming reality of the COVID-19 pandemic we are suffering through today. Unless we take urgent action now, more and more people will fall into poverty globally (Oxfam, 2020). Many school children will become dropouts and the poorest groups will be hit the hardest. The disparity between the rich and poor will become wider, leading to even more extreme levels of inequality.

Many individuals likely have experienced other types of pandemics in the past, such as other diseases and war. But for many people, COVID-19 is the first such crisis they have lived through. It came slowly at first and then spread like wildfire. Everyone was hoping that a vaccine would be found to wipe out the disease, and life would be the same as it was before, like in the "good old days." Since they became available in 2020, many pharmaceutical companies have promoted the various vaccines they developed, and many nations around the world have started to receive them, in the hope that it would allow their populations to lead a COVID-free life.

Since these vaccines came on the scene, signs of an emerging second “new normal” way of life have slowly begun to creep into every country and every nation, everywhere on the globe. This emergence has brought stress for some, hope for others, and uncertainty for most. The second new normal will be different from the first new normal we all lived through in the early stages of the pandemic, before the vaccines were discovered and distributed globally. Complete lockdowns, partial lockdowns, and social distancing were all parts of the first new normal as COVID-19 spread rapidly. Such preventive measures, policies, and actions are still being strictly adhered to in countries where the COVID-19 pandemic has not weakened substantially.

Other nations are slowly developing their own strategies, such as fining people who are not following the law, educating society through the media and the schools, and so on. All these actions and precautions serve one main purpose: to eradicate the COVID-19 virus from the entire demographic spectrum.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE OLD NORMAL BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, THE NEW NORMAL DURING THE PANDEMIC, AND THE NEW NORMAL AFTER THE PANDEMIC ENDS**

During the normal times before the COVID-19 pandemic, people were free to go anywhere, travel abroad without much hassle, and organize any sort of event freely. They could have weddings and other celebrations with large groups and organize conferences with hundreds of participants interacting face-to-face—in a word, life was normal for everyone.

Then came the pandemic and life for everyone completely changed. People could not visit one another, and gatherings were not allowed. The worst scenario was when a person died of COVID-19: no one except for one or two family members was allowed to attend the burial. Social distancing was the law in most nations that were not otherwise adhering to the new SOPs (standard operating procedures).

The second new normal after the pandemic ends will require acceptance of the need to adapt to the circumstances at that time. Most people will have been vaccinated, but everyone will still have to follow the SOPs and the laws of their own country. If they have to go to another country to work or attend to family matters, they will need

to abide by the laws of that country. This new normal might go on for another few years.

The second new normal will be different for groups of people in different societies and nations. Not only will the ways of life change, but also the ways one embraces life. This will force us to face the difficult choice of becoming realistic or continuing to embrace the idealistic notions and unrealistic hopes that most of us have been slow to give up and adapt to the new norms.

### **REALISM VERSUS IDEALISM**

The hope that everyone can go back to their old way of life is very well suited to the current moment. Realism is accepting the state of things as they exist now, as opposed to adopting the idealistic thoughts and emotions of being back in the “good old days.” “Idealism” is a term in philosophy that refers to the rejection of a physical reality. The conflict between realism and idealism plays out in the mind of every single individual who has an ounce of common sense.

Those in the realism camp confront the COVID-19 pandemic era with a sense of awe and responsibility. They are prepared to transform themselves into another person and adopt another way of life. They understand the need to do what is required of them, both in public and in private. This conduct is not only probable but easily achievable for such individuals, but only if they live in a society that has endured other pandemics or life crises in the past.

### **MORAL EDUCATION IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA**

Moral Education, whether a stand-alone subject or embedded among other subjects, has been gaining popularity in schools during the first new normal. Many see Moral Education as a subject that bridges the gap between real-life and how individuals think, feel, and act about things (Balakrishnan, 2020b). Moral Education is also compatible with UNESCO’s philosophy of education, which is focused on the inculcation of knowledge, skills, and values.

Moral Education will tend to support or encourage individuals and societies to be more sensitive to the norms of the second new normal after the COVID-19 pandemic. The tension between the norms dictated by COVID-19 and the traditional moral and

societal norms will be the “talk of the town.” In the days before COVID-19, cultural practices that include physical contact (e.g., handshakes, hugging) in social gatherings were prioritized in Eastern and even some Western cultures. Now the focus is on social distancing, hygiene, and health-related concerns. When societal norms clash with government laws and regulations, the law wins out. For example, in some Eastern cultures, for two individuals to *salam*, or physically embrace each other when they meet, used to be a common normative practice. But nowadays, such norms are not practiced due to the fear that one party or the other might be carrying the COVID-19 virus and transmit it to others.

## **THE ROLE OF MORAL EDUCATION**

Moral Education, a subject that trains the mind to think, the heart to feel, and the body to act in moral ways, will be essential in the post-COVID-19- pandemic era. In each of the three eras (dominated by old norms, pandemic norms, and post-pandemic norms respectively), all dimensions of Moral Education have needed to be or will need to be learned and applied.

Educating the mind is important because individuals and society need to be provided comprehensive knowledge about the effects of COVID-19 and how they can avoid being infected by or avoid transmitting the virus.

Educating the heart is important to ensure that emotions are managed well, especially during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotions should be cultivated with concern and care. When the society or the nation introduces laws and regulations, in addition to using rational thinking, one needs to be emotionally stable in order to take care of oneself or help others take care of themselves.

Moral actions have been prominently displayed during the pandemic period. For example, individuals have reached out to those severely affected by the pandemic and helped provide them with material and moral support. Moreover, they have reached out to as many people as they could in as many ways as they could.

Our analyses of the case studies below illustrate how Moral Education can play a major role in ensuring that the new norms in society are managed skilfully.

## Case 1

Japan experienced the COVID-19 pandemic just like any other nation. It underwent a lot of turmoil and challenges and had to make many *ad hoc* decisions regarding health and safety. As time went on, Japanese nationals—who were used to crises such as typhoons and earthquakes—came to terms with COVID-19. They knew that everyone has an important role to play in facing a pandemic.

Both individuals and institutions in Japan have generally accepted the fact that COVID-19 might be on earth to stay for a long time. Japanese industry has offered guidance on how to co-exist with COVID-19 in the future. Meanwhile, the government has continued to enforce strict hygiene protocols and has enacted even more stringent social distancing policies. This move is not surprising, because as other Asian countries were eagerly moving towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution, also called Industry 4.0—a new phase of the Industrial Revolution that focuses heavily on interconnectivity, automation, machine learning, and collection of real-time data—Japan was already looking forward to Smart Society 5.0, in which advanced technologies will be developed to achieve convergence between cyberspace and physical space, enabling AI-based applications on large databases and robots to perform or support new tasks and adjustments to existing tasks that humans have been unable to perform up to now.

As Japan underwent rapid industrial development after World War II, most Japanese nationals understood the negative effects of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: therefore, they are intelligent enough and wise enough to keep an open mind before making judgments when any future pandemic or other crisis occurs.

Industry groups in Japan have been collaborating with one another, and on 15 May 2020 jointly issued a summary of guidelines for the functioning of Japanese society (Osaki, 2020). It includes:

Individuals/Agencies/Places	Industry guidelines
<i>Keidanren</i> (Japanese Business Federation)	Introduction of new work styles and policies such as teleworking and a three-day work week
Restaurants	Seats moved farther apart and facing in the same direction
<i>Pachinko</i> (a mixture of slot machine and pinball parlors)	Distributing tickets for parlor entry, keeping every other seat vacant, and turning down music volume
Movie theaters	Keeping every other seat vacant including those directly behind and in front of another viewer
Cram schools	Establishing online classes for students unable to attend classes in person
Retailers	assigning store hours exclusively for high-risk shoppers such as elderly people and expectant mothers
Airlines	Limiting in-flight beverages to fruit juices
Railway operations	Keeping windows open, keeping ventilation systems on, and requiring passengers to wear a mask
Hotels	Limiting face-to-face encounters at the reception desk and not escorting guests to their room in person
Sporting events	Asking attendees to wear a mask and conducting a health check two weeks prior to each event

While most other nations were panicking about facing the new norms, Japan was already thinking ahead and enforcing adoption of practical lifestyles for some aspects of daily living. Thus, co-existence with COVID-19 has become a norm for Japanese individuals and the society at large. It is no wonder that while every other nation was adopting and getting excited about Industry 4.0, Japan was already educating its citizens about Smart Society 5.0.

Although the post-pandemic era has not yet begun, it is being reported that some individuals in Japanese society nonetheless have been observed crowding into public transport areas, even though they had been reminded by the local authorities that the COVID-19 SOPs are still in effect.

## Case 2

Malaysia and Indonesia are two nations where the belief systems of Islam and many other religions play an important role in the life of their citizens. Before the emergence of COVID-19, there was much focus on praying together, celebrating holidays *en masse* with family and friends, and even attending huge celebrations organized by the state.

Individuals from different faiths and with different belief systems get together on certain days to pray together or practice communal ways of life. Before COVID-19, these communal norms included physical interactions such as handshaking, hugging, and embracing. These gestures mean a lot to each individual, family, and community, whether they occur at worship services, social get-togethers, or even funerals. These traditions all have their own structured rituals and norms that must be followed strictly.

Young children in Islamic families in Malaysia are taught to greet their elders by *cium tangan* (hand-kissing, where the child reaches out with both hands, takes holds of the right hand of the elderly person, and then kisses it). It is an action that communicates respect, politeness, and admiration for the other. In such societies, when people of the same sex meet they hug and kiss one another on the cheek as a sign of friendship, as an acknowledgement of a family relationship, or just as a greeting.

In several other Eastern cultures, physical touching is not a norm, and people are more likely to greet one another with just a *vanakam*, or handshake (which reflects a Western influence). These societies have less of a problem creating this new norm than those whose members are already accustomed to interacting with one another physically.

Thus, the new social norm of keeping social distance from each other while not allowing close physical contact and strictly forbidding attending celebrations that are expected to attract massive numbers of people, is not easily accepted. Such conduct goes against the norms and traditions these societies have been practicing for generations and can cause members of certain groups in these societies to feel sad and isolated.



Social distancing is a new norm. Although it is practiced worldwide, it is seen as incompatible with Eastern societies, which embrace the opposite of this norm. In many closely knit societies that are strongly identified with a certain religion, hugging and shaking hands has been a cultural and social practice for generations. The type and extent of change in the second new normal will depend on the type and the number of activities challenged by some emergency or a threat to the social stability of the community (Buheji and Buheji, 2020).

## **DISCUSSION**

In Cases 1 and 2, several key issues can be identified. In both cases the societies face similar situations: the spread of COVID-19, the state or national government initiating and implementing various strategies to control the spread of COVID-19, and local communities cooperating with the local council and state government in fighting the pandemic, hoping that the hardship will lessen. The differences can be seen in how individuals and the society as a whole embrace the new norms.

In Case 1, it was easier to accept the new norms than in Case 2, partly because Japanese culture tends to be non-physical. Respecting one's elders is expressed by nodding the head and bowing. The younger one is, the lower he or she bows. Moreover, Japanese individuals, regardless of gender, are used to dining on their own and traveling by public transport on their own—even senior citizens are used to living on their own and are very self-sufficient.

But the situation is very different in Case 2. In a society where people embrace one another physically, the new norm that embodies the expectation that everyone practice social distancing and avoid physical contact can be very challenging to conform to. This conformance requires a totally new way of life, and individuals struggle to follow the new norms. During the major holiday seasons in Malaysia and Indonesia, both governments have chosen to restrict the movement of people from city to village and vice versa. This was to ensure that the COVID-19 virus would not spread to vulnerable individuals such as the elderly and young children.

Naturally when people in these societies went back to their hometown and met up with family members and friends, the first reaction was to *salam*, to embrace and physically hug to show their appreciation for one another. The new normal society

will require people to refrain from and even ignore the values associated with the traditional norms. These situations will create many new opportunities but also many challenges at both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

Hence, in most nations—including Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia—that have a philosophy of Moral Education that focuses on moral reasoning, moral emotions, and moral action, there is a serious need to take another look at Moral Education. There is a need to make it more user-friendly and to further explore the relevant opportunities and challenges available at both the micro and macro levels.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

During the coming era of the second new normal, many sorts of challenges will be expected to arise in different sectors of society. This might be the time for us to get inspired by the opportunities that come with new challenges and to develop the resilience and tolerance needed to survive during these times of transformation.

At an intrapersonal level, we need to learn to appreciate ourselves as complete individuals, happy with ourselves and our peaceful lives. Young children and seniors naturally feel complete with no outside help. It is the adolescents and young adults who must learn to embrace this new norm gracefully as they become used to being with their friends and socializing with their other peers in new ways.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents who isolated themselves from others were called “anti-social.” But with the new normal, to isolate oneself, keep a distance from others, and avoid speaking unless necessary began to be considered good form. If people wanted to go to the bank or any other public place, they had to wear a face mask and follow other regulations before entering, e.g., scan a QR code or take one’s own temperature.

The advantages to society of such new norms is that they will incentivize people to follow rules and regulations, be respectful of others and sensitive to their needs, while learning to appreciate the positive side of having to spend more time alone.

On the interpersonal plane, individuals will have to learn to discipline themselves in public places, but even more importantly in non-public places. Virtues such as self-discipline, integrity, and honesty must be cultivated. For example,

individuals who are asked to isolate themselves for various reasons must have great integrity and a sense of social responsibility if they are to be seen as following the rules.

All in all, the second new normal society will be a society that requires us to be civilized and disciplined, to be resilient, and to have the competence to successfully overcome any challenges we face. We need to see challenges not as impediments, but as opportunities to transform the situation into something more positive if we can learn to approach the challenge with confidence and embrace it.

The global lockdown of educational institutions became the new normal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interruptions to students' learning and teachers' teaching, as well as disruptions in internal and external evaluations of summative and formative assessments, posed real challenges. But these challenges also compelled us to design innovative ways to combine teaching with learning and different kinds of learning with each other, and to design alternative online evaluation methods. Now that Industry 4.0 has come fully into existence, many are enjoying the fruits of technology and the different uses of apps as well as online platforms.

In higher education, many universities and colleges are replacing traditional exams with online assessment tools. We are entering a new area for both teachers and students, and the new assessment tools at first will likely have more measurement errors than the old ones. Research shows that employers now use educational credentials such as academic degrees and grade point averages to sort applicants for acceptance into colleges and universities (Piopiunik et al., 2020). Thus, the second new normal society is likely to be more innovative in creating more new ways to measure university students' achievement, and the tools are likely to be more holistic, comprehensive, and transparent than those we have now.

The second new normal society will need efficient solutions that leverage and develop innovative strategies and mechanisms on multiple new fronts. As we enter this transformational era, ways to deal with new devastating pandemics need to be invested in, recognized, and amplified. Therefore, it will be a time for inspiration and resilience that enhance trust in the people and give them opportunities to create change. This process should start with young children and go all the way up to senior citizens. According to Buheji and Sisk (2020), the unprecedented chaos that the

COVID-19 pandemic created brought with it hybrid opportunities that can now be seen manifested in healthcare, social development, and untapped economic potential.

There also will be hidden opportunities that come with the rise of these challenges and risks. For example, during the early stages of the pandemic, lockdowns encouraged people to work from home, and a new norm was created that forced many to learn how to balance work and home in a more constructive manner. On the other hand, people started to suffer anxiety or stress due to worry about their future prospects because of the turbulence and instability affecting their careers, educational plans, and life journeys. Balance between the two will be much needed in the post-COVID-19 era.

Therefore, health and economic authorities and other national and state policy makers will need to bring in more impactful programs to ensure that every society has some sort of support system that helps it manage the consequences of COVID-19.

## **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us to appreciate the simple things in life, such as valuing our time, learning to be silent, and staying positive. If we must reprimand someone, we must do it constructively. Many a time we think that only adults go through stress in their life, having to juggle work, home, and social responsibilities. However, even a young child may undergo stress at home, but quite often that stress is not addressed.

For a start, the teaching of humanities subjects such as Moral Education in schools should no longer be focused on exams and grades, at least until the COVID-19 pandemic ends, but schools should concentrate rather on the well-being of their students (Balakrishnan, 2020a).

Social media platforms should focus on humor and joyful living rather than just on the economy and finance. Yes, money is important, but it cannot buy happiness, take away stress, or bring back a lost life. Teachers and parents play a key role in ensuring that children and students are always happy and cheerful.

Many simple yet effective activities can be carried out together as a family or as a school class, while still adhering to physical distancing. The COVID-19 pandemic

has taught the world a great deal about resilience, having hope, and accepting the challenges of a new normal. In the meantime, let us educate ourselves, our children, and our students to stay joyful and happy. This is the most important part of the journey toward becoming the next new normal society.

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