Does "Sully" Reveal How To Cope With Anxiety?

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Captain Chesley (Sully) Sullenberger was piloting US Airways Flight 1549 which crash landed in May 2014 on to the Hudson River. This "Miracle on the Hudson" is the focus of Tom Hanks movie, Sully.

Source: Plane crash into Hudson River.jpg
Author Greg L

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miracle_on_the_Hudson.jpg
Sully’s plane collided with birds almost immediately after take-off, producing dramatic power loss in all engines.

Leon Assael, writing in an academic journal for surgeons, attempting to glean lessons for doctors who must demonstrate similar unflappability in emergencies, comments, "The flight recording of the final 2.5 minutes of Flight 1549 are extraordinary in the coolness and business-like words of Sully, ending with 'Teterboro no good...We'll be in the Hudson.'"

In a paper published in The Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery entitled, "'Sully' Sullenberger and the Miracle on the Hudson: A Lesson in Heroism for Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons," Leon Assael asks, given “Sully” Sullenberger achieved what no pilot had ever done before, crashing a commercial jet on water without the loss of life, are there lessons for all of us struggling to be similarly heroic within our own personal crises?
"Sully calmly spent what was likely the last 2.5 minutes of his life working with his co-pilot going through the engine restart checklist, assessing his navigation to optimize the best place to ditch, communicating with the Westbury control tower, managing his crew and passengers, lifting the nose, barely clearing the mid-span of the George Washington Bridge, missing the boats in the harbor, dropping his tail to impact the water first, hydroplaning to a stop, safely evacuating all passengers and crew, assessing that his plane was empty of all souls, and then leading his crew in the water rescue of every single passenger.

But what the Hollywood depiction of heroism misses is that Sully and the flight crew all suffered from trauma symptoms for many months afterwards.

Dr. Marjorie Podraza Stiegler of the Anesthesiology Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, in a paper entitled "What I Learned About Adverse Events From Captain Sully: It's Not What You Think," asks why:

"...if Captain Sully’s years of experience had all been a cumulative preparation for this most unlikely event, and if he did just about everything right (and quickly), could he not sleep or concentrate for three months? Why did he need medications to control his racing heart and high blood pressure? Why could he not return to the skies for nearly half a year? First Officer Jeff Skiles experienced similar aftermath, according to Sully...even the air traffic controller Patrick Harten had to be removed immediately from duty and was unable to return to work for about a month and reported only beginning to feel good about that event a full year later. Mr Harten says, “It may sound strange, but for me the hardest part of the event was when it was over. During the event I was hyperfocused...but when it was over, it hit me hard.” Captain Sully shared this sentiment, telling me that he felt in control during the event, and in shock immediately afterward, and the total impact took some time to process. The flight crew also took time away, and one flight crew member with 38 years of experience never returned. I was surprised to know that after a hugely successful demonstration of teamwork and skill, and a landmark safety save, all of the parties involved were so adversely affected."

Leon Assael points out:

"When asked during an interview if he panicked or prayed during those final moments, Sully seemed surprised by the question. 'Why no,' he replied. 'There were plenty of people in the back of the plane doing that for me...But afterwards, I really let go.'"

Perhaps one answer to the conundrum of how to confront anxiety and terror is that during an emergency, heroes focus on what needs to be done to survive, or save lives. This means they are able to shove panic to one side, preventing interference with survival. But when the immediate crisis is over, maybe it is the lack of an immediately pressing goal which releases the underlying emotional turmoil. Once the crisis is over, there is no remaining imperative to suppress feelings.

Maybe the process isn’t helped by all those well-meaning friends, relatives and even counselors constantly inquiring, "How are you feeling?" After all, no one in Sully’s cockpit checked whether anyone "wanted to share" in the seconds before diving into the Hudson.
In surviving a crisis, emotions take the back seat while the brain takes command of the careening vehicle that is your life.

This suggests that in order to overcome anxiety and fear you need a pressing resolve or reason which will help you suppress emotion—not ventilate it. Most anxious and fearful people are encouraged to share their feelings, and are waiting to become less tense before pursuing goals.

Stiegler, in her article on Sully in the Journal of the American Medical Association, contends that doctors are suffering from “aviation fatigue,” from incessant airline industry safety lessons. Detecting and learning from aircrew error, supposedly transferring this to physicians under similar pressure as pilots.

But doctors appear expected to return to looking after patients the very next day, indeed, the very next hour, no matter what trauma they have just faced in the operating theatre or in the casualty department, including sudden unexpected patient death or suicide. Sully and his crew were not expected to resume flying the very next day. They were given a lot of breathing time to recover.

So, maybe one lesson from the story of Sully is that courage is more ordinary than extraordinary. Perhaps we are all more capable of heroism than the Hollywood depiction of the ‘heroic’ allows?

In the chapter entitled "Resilience" in the Encyclopedia of Mental Health is the following quote:

"The regularity with which humans overcome life obstacles has been referred to as ‘ordinary magic’ …a notion that contradicts much popular press coverage of ‘overcoming the odds.’"

Leon Assael, formerly Dean of the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, who declared: “A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer."

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