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AGBU Holds First Virtual Resilience Summit to Help Armenians Cope with Crises

In response to the collective toll the global pandemic and the trauma of the Artsakh War has taken on Armenians everywhere, a virtual summit on the psycho-social dynamics of these transformative crises was organized by AGBU in conjunction with the American University of Armenia (AUA) and the Armenian Mental Health Initiative (AMHI). The two-part virtual event, which took place on February 20 and February 21, was hosted by the AGBU Armenian Virtual College (AVC), enabling a diverse panel of experts to connect with an audience of over 200 participants across 26 countries.

Each day's program was divided into multiple segments that explored different dimensions of coping with crisis—from social media overload and news misinformation, activism burnout, unresolved traumas triggered from previous tragedies in Armenian history, and second-hand wounds from relentless reports with disturbing news and imagery from the homeland. Every session featured a panel of authorities in relevant fields, from licensed mental health professionals and researchers to educators and media specialists. They not only analyzed the issues at play but also provided practical solutions and words of inspiration, based on their current professional wisdom and experiences, both clinical and personal.

In explaining the motivation behind the summit, AGBU Central Board Member and education specialist Lena Sarkissian, stated, "Wars do not simply end on the day of truce, they live in the collective mind, and thus, shape the future perspective of a people," adding that turning to the community of experts would help explore the transformative power of resilience building. "It is a tangled interplay of experiences and coping skills, a complex dynamic between lived experiences and the resources available to manage, adapt, and most importantly, thrive."

The first session, moderated by journalist and thought leader Lara Setrakian, tackled the war's effect on the soul with psychotherapist and author Dr. Edward Tick, an expert on moral injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for veterans in his course, *War and the Soul: Healing a Wounded Society*. Dr. Tick pointed out the similarities civilians might share with those returning from war, asserting that both experience a damaged soul and must hide wounds seen and unseen. The cure for a broken spirit, Dr. Tick concluded, can be found with spirituality in community. "It's absolutely essential that you bring that wisdom back, share it with society, help everybody become initiated to what war and violence really do, and become a teacher and a servant for healing. And that will restore your purpose," Dr. Tick concluded.

While this panel examined how to rewire the soul, the next panel *Managing Grief*, moderated by educator and nonprofit director Nanor Balabanian, focused on how to rewire our brains. In a conversation with licensed marriage and family therapists Debi Jenkins Frankle, Mark Frankle, and Tamar Sevajian, in addition to trauma specialist Kegnani Mardikian, the focus was mending old wounds. Panelists agreed that using different forms of strength-based therapy—most importantly restoration therapy—can aid in the healing process. "We often replay moments of powerlessness until we understand how to interrupt that pattern," said Sevajian, concluding with: "Only then are we able to move into a peace cycle based in our truth."

The conversation moved to consider the crucial role of digital media in the Artsakh War and the subsequent toll it took on social channel users confronted by constant Azeri-backed misinformation campaigns, traumatizing pictures of war, and a fixed attachment to our screens.

The next panel *Don't Just Yell at the Internet: Overcoming Social/Media Triggers*, moderated by educator Dr. Ani Shabazian, featured licensed marriage and family therapist and anger management specialist Anita Avedian, and psychiatrist Lara G. Shirikjian and Lara Setrakian. They honed in on techniques to avoid such triggers during a social media frenzy.

For journalist Setrakian, the answer is as simple as tailoring one's "information diet" and turning down the volume of news for extended periods of time. "You don't have to read everything; you don't even have to watch everything," she posited. "You can pull back and save your energy." While obsessive social media consumption is a pressing issue that will likely affect future generations to come, the next panel, moderated by EBM specialist Yerado Abrahamian, took a step back to focus on the trauma we've inherited from our ancestors and how to move forward with these physiological and psychological changes.

Intergenerational Pain: Anxiety, Uncertainty and Quieting the Inner Critic, with licensed clinical psychologist and founding executive director of AMHI Yeraz Markarian, along with licensed clinical psychologist and executive co-director of AMHI Valentina Ogaryan, addressed the use of social connections as an "emotional vitamin" and how to use hope to achieve resilience-building. Ogaryan aptly stated: "Resilience is the ability to bounce back and to move forward. We are impacted by adversity. It means that we have obstacles as human beings that we need to overcome."

Recognizing that laughter can often be the best medicine to relieve stress and sorrow, there seemed to be no better way to end the first day of the summit than with actor, artist, and writer Vahe Berberian, globally recognized for his sharp-witted humor and stand-up comic sets. Berberian's philosophical premise was resilience as love, and consequentially love as art, which can heal our nation. "We should take a close look at ourselves in the mirror, both individually and as a nation, because our national character is the sum total of what we are individually."

After a welcome by Dr. Varduhi Petrosyan, Dean of the AUA Turpanjian School of Public Health, the second day's sessions began with a look at the resilience of the genocide generation with Dr. Roberta Ervine, professor of Armenian Christian Studies at the St. Nersess Seminary. She examined the role of blame and guilt among survivors of genocide, an all too familiar feeling for Armenians today who lived through the first war, the earthquake, the Lebanon explosion, and now the Artsakh War. Yet, random acts of kindness, community, and resilience have historically banded our nation together—a lesson that can be applied today. "All of you who are present already are called upon to do the same in this generation," said Dr. Ervine. "May you find the immoral fortitude to take the threads in your hands by doing what seems to need doing, simply because you are the ones here to do it."

The following panel examined the present-day situation with a look at *What We're Seeing Right Now, How We're Coping*, moderated by child psychiatrist Dr. Louis M. Najarian, featuring discussants Dr. Khachatur Gasparyan and Dr. Sevan Minassian, a psychologist and psychiatrist from Armenia and France, respectively. Through the lenses of a local and diasporan, both have observed first-hand how to overcome the sense of hopelessness in Armenia. The only way to confront such feelings, all panelists concluded, is to acknowledge the pain, thereby creating both tolerance and confidence. As Dr. Minassian put it, "We have to negotiate with our feelings of powerlessness with the war. As Diasporans, we have to deal with our cultural countertransference. We have to take this into account and decentralize ourselves with reflectivity."

In natural succession, the next panel of the day answered the question on everyone's mind: *Where Are We Going?* Delving into strategic mechanisms to move towards post-traumatic growth, licensed clinical psychologist Dr. Ani Karayan, AUA adjunct professor Dr. Vahe Khachadourian, and psychiatrist Dr. Najarian concluded that looking at disaster studies from the past can help inform trained professionals on how to bounce back in the present, using targeted interventions that address specific needs in the population. Dr. Khachadourian summarized it best: "A lesson we can learn from this is practicing and promoting individual-level factors; education, positive thinking, and mindfulness. We want to advocate for efficient and evidence-based targeted interventions."

The final panel of the summit focused on shaping the future of Armenia with success and *Resilience in Business and Life*. AGBU Central Board Member and Founding President of AVC Dr. Yervant Zorian moderated the conversation with senior manager of research and development at Synopsys Armenia Hripsime Hakobyan, business coach and prosperity mentor Rita Hovakimian and global branding expert Vasken Kalayjian. The panel discussed best practices for good business and successful lifestyles, including meditation, creating values-based organizations, and cultivating optimism. "When difficult things happen in life, unless we have the strong muscle of resilience, and an optimistic way of dealing with difficult situations, we will self-sabotage," said Kalayjian, who has witnessed the downfall of businesses due to the unresolved personal issues of CEOs. "Exercising a vision and building value around that is key, which can translate that into our personal lives," he suggested.

Dr. Zorian, in his closing remarks, noted that the participant demographics covered all age groups and an array of countries. "This shows us that resilience is a need, whatever age group or country we are in," he said, after which he announced plans are underway to host a subsequent resilience summit in the Armenian language in spring.

Positive and congratulatory comments in the virtual chat room reinforced how necessary and overdue this event was for the Armenians in communities across the globe. In an intentional move to continue the conversation on healthy coping in times of extreme crisis, the resources and advice provided by panelists are accessible on The Resilience Summit portal on the AVC platform at (www.avc-agbu.org (<https://avc-agbu.org/en/.html>)).

[Click here \(https://agbu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Virtual-Resilience-Summit_ARMENIAN2.pdf\)](https://agbu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Virtual-Resilience-Summit_ARMENIAN2.pdf) to read this press release in Armenian

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