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Essay Topic: Science and health: what should we change to be more resilient?

2020 is turning out to be a tumultuous year due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this is not the first time in history that humanity has been hit with such an outbreak. Ebola killed thousands in 2013-2016; SARS in 2003; Influenza in 1957- 1958 killed over a million, and the Spanish flu killed over 50 million in 1918-1920.

Today it is COVID-19. Tomorrow another widespread pandemic could challenge us even more. To tackle future viruses and pandemics, we need to be more resilient, especially by focusing on our health-related and scientific capabilities.

Firstly, combating virus attacks, we at individual level require strong immunity; therefore, we must maintain a healthier lifestyle. Further, enabling our bodies to build resilience and fight effectively when infected. Physical exercise and healthy eating strengthens immunity and increases physical resilience. A high immunity also ensures that we do not suffer from other acute illnesses, and are susceptible to such virus attacks. Furthermore, raising awareness and promoting hygiene practices such as washing hands regularly and wearing masks will decrease the chances of people catching viruses and other immunity-weakening diseases.

It is not just physical resilience, though, that makes one more energetic. Mental strength, too, is imperative to staying resilient. When faced with challenges and new realities such as homeschooling, working from home, and lack of physical contact with family and friends, it is vital to stay mentally strong.

A recent study found that psychological distress is common both during periods of quarantine. Researchers suggest that steps such as establishing routines, being active, communicating with loved ones, and staying informed but not overwhelmed help mitigate

adverse mental health effects of quarantine. People need to know about these steps so that they can help themselves and others around them.

While individuals can protect themselves by focusing on their physical and mental resilience, governments also need to strengthen their scientific capabilities. As per World Bank, while the current healthcare expenditure of the world as % of GDP is at 9.9%, it is a meager 2-3% in many developing countries like India, Ethiopia, Malaysia and Pakistan. With better healthcare funding across countries, many lives can be saved.

A significant portion of this increased funding must be channeled towards exploring and studying new viruses that could potentially impact us. The more we know about them, the sooner treatments will be made available. We must also leverage science to increase the exploration and discovery of new viruses and to develop more medical procedures and vaccines to help with recovery and fight infections in the first place.

Developing scientific resilience has helped us in the past too. An example of this is the Influenza virus pandemic that took the world by storm just over 100 years ago. According to the CDC, the outbreak caused ~50 million deaths worldwide. With the development of effective treatments and medications, these deaths are now limited to an estimated 24,000 – 62,000 only from October 2019 to April 2020. This is a perfect example of the appropriate scientific focus and research investment that leads to human resilience development.

The more we learn about viruses, the faster we can develop medicines and treatments for them that could save thousands of lives in the future. The faster our people change their lifestyles to become more immune physically and mentally, the quicker we will recover from the damage this pandemic has caused us. Resilience is what will help us rebuild, reform, and recover from the damage COVID-19 has caused. Then, if we are faced with a new pandemic, we will be ready.