

BANKING INSIGHT

IDEAS FOR LEADERS | DECEMBER 2021

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Move Along, Goldilocks

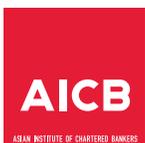
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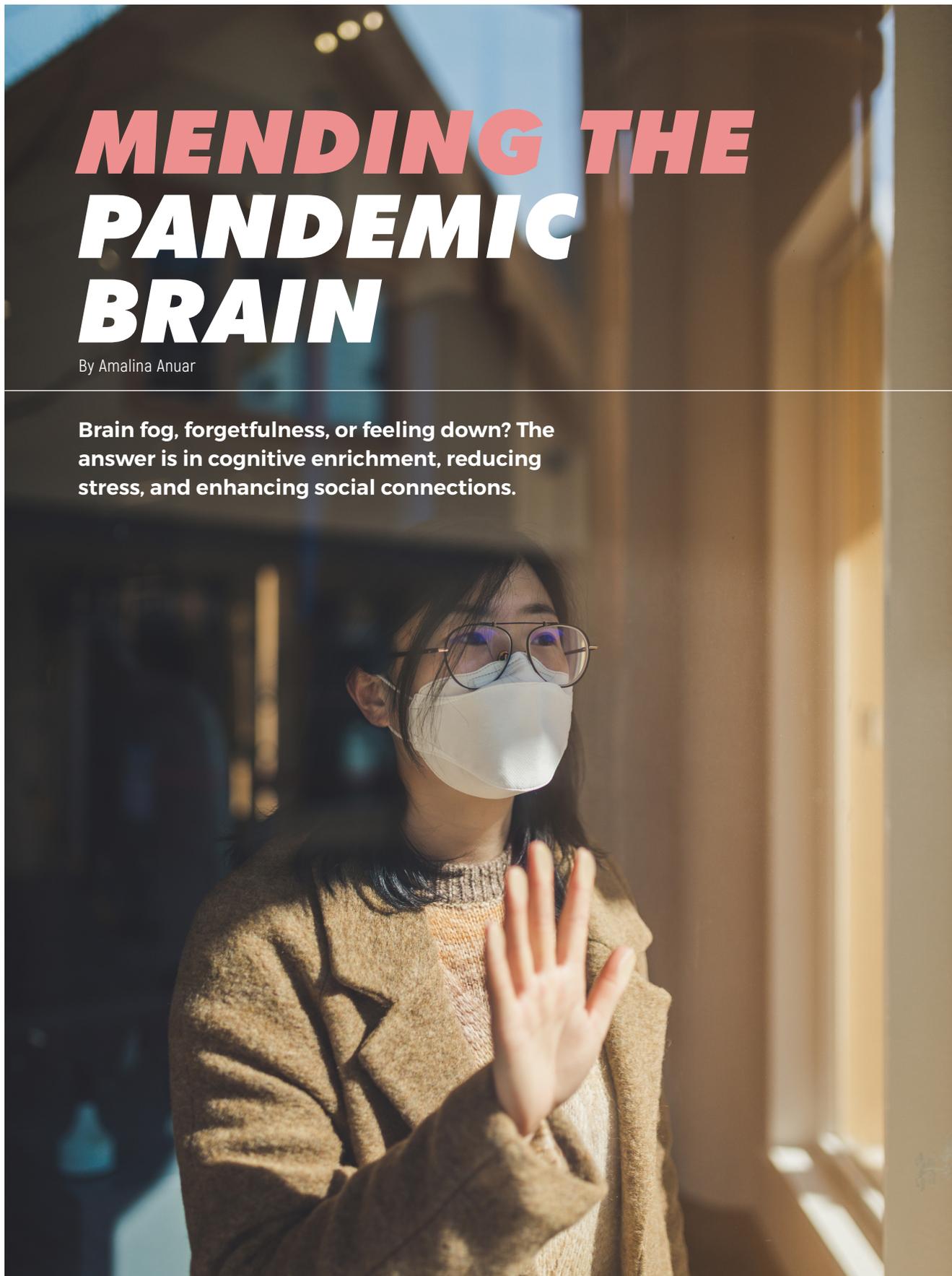


**AGILE MUST
EVOLVE
OR DIE**

MENDING THE PANDEMIC BRAIN

By Amalina Anuar

Brain fog, forgetfulness, or feeling down? The answer is in cognitive enrichment, reducing stress, and enhancing social connections.



Covid-19 has not been kind to our brains. With distress, isolation, and prolonged boredom in the air thanks to successive lockdowns, cases of pandemic brain have been both prevalent and persistent.

Everywhere, significant chunks of the population are experiencing brain fog, trouble concentrating, and forgetfulness, among other things, that affect day-to-day functioning when it comes to work and beyond.

If there is a silver lining, however, it's this: it is possible to reverse the effects of pandemic brain.

ON THE MEND

Stress and boredom impact our brains in a multitude of complex ways. The short of it though is that they can form a harmful cocktail for learning, memory, and general cognitive functioning. To give but one example, distress can destroy and suppress the growth and reorganisation of new neural connections in certain brain regions; meanwhile, a lack of stimulation and challenge can discourage the forging of new connections.

It stands to reason then that reducing stress — specifically negative stress, emphasises Harvard psychiatry professor Dr Kerry Ressler in the *Harvard Health* blog post *Protect Your Brain from Stress* — can significantly improve mental well-being, and research supports this. What's more, according to Dr Rebecca Price, a Pittsburgh University psychiatry and behavioural science professor, in an article by *MIT Technology Review*: "If you create for yourself a more enriched environment where you have more possible inputs and interactions and stimuli, then [your brain] will respond to that."

Implementing holistic mental health — the approach of treating the whole person, including mental and social factors, rather than just the symptoms of a disease — as described above requires a mix of self-care and community care in the workplace.

Self-care emphasises what individuals can do for themselves, for instance,

wellness tips or mindfulness techniques. Yet, whether in the troughs of trauma or the pitfalls of pandemic brain, it can be difficult for individuals to recover from mental health problems alone. There are days when basic self-care feels impossible and not for lack of trying. In some ways, those suffering shouldn't be going it solo.

Social connection and support are critical to recovery. Even the most introverted person is inherently, based on neurological make-up, a social creature. This may not mean desiring the same kinds of interaction as extroverts, but it does underscore how social connection has a place in life across the board. Social psychology research confirms that human well-being thrives on connection — both deep and meaningful relations as well as more casual, weak ties — and isolation is stressful.

As Dr James Coan, a University of Virginia psychology professor, elaborates in health and wellness blog, *Elemental*: "All else being equal, when we're alone, our brain is a little more vigilant for any signs of danger. Also, our brain perceives demands from the world as more demanding than they would be if we had someone with us. And there's a really simple reason for it; it's that the world is more demanding when we're

Yet, whether in the troughs of trauma or the pitfalls of pandemic brain, it can be **DIFFICULT FOR INDIVIDUALS TO RECOVER FROM MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ALONE**. There are days when basic self-care feels impossible and not for lack of trying. In some ways, those suffering shouldn't be going it solo.





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