

Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science*

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Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic covered in this peer-reviewed APS bimonthly journal, which features reviews covering all of scientific psychology and its applications.

The Likely Aftermath of Adversity: Harm, Resilience, or Growth?

by David G. Myers

[Infurna, F. J., & Jayawickreme, E. \(2019\). Fixing the growth illusion: New directions for research in resilience and posttraumatic growth. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28, 152–158. doi: 10.1177/0963721419827017](#)

At various times, humans experience deprivation, suffering, bereavement, and even trauma. After the initial emotions of such adversity subside, Frank Infurna and Eranda Jayawickreme (2019) note, there are three possible long-term outcomes:

Harm

Harm entails the enduring toxic consequences of deprivation or trauma. Students could perhaps generate examples from psychological research, such as the following:

- **Severe deprivation:** Early experiences can have lifelong scars, as exemplified by Harlow's isolation-reared monkeys; the orphanage-reared children of Ceaușescu's Romania, whose deprivation enduringly impaired their brain development, intelligence, and social development (Nelson, Fox, & Zeanah, 2014); and the stories of children scarred after family separation by immigration authorities (Chapin, 2019).
- **The worst loss:** Certain catastrophic events can have a deep emotional impact, such as the lingering pain of a child's death (Li, Laursen, Precht, Olsen, & Mortensen, 2005).
- **The toll of trauma:** Other events can also leave a "long trail," such as the distress experienced after school shootings or the toxicity of the prolonged stress of burdensome caregiving (Aneshensel, Pearlin, Mullan, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 1995; Mazzei & Jordan, 2019).

Resilience

Some individuals show resilience, which is characterized by stable and healthy functioning before and after adversity. Again, examples come to mind:

- **The striking stability of subjective well-being:** Negative as well as positive emotions have a short half-life, in that most people recover from romantic breakups, job losses, and infirmities (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). As the Psalmist observed long ago: "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalms 30:5).
- **The successful coping of people with disabilities:** After suffering paralysis, blindness, or even locked-in syndrome, dispositionally agreeable people are seldom permanently

depressed and they often regain near-normal life satisfaction (Boyce & Wood, 2011; Bruno, Bernheim, Ledoux, Pellas, Demertzi, & Laureys, 2011).

- **The hardiness of some trauma survivors:** Even after being stunned by wartime trauma, terrorism, or natural disaster, a common human response is “a stable trajectory of healthy functioning” (Bonanno, 2012). The life successes of children who survived the Holocaust testify to human strengths (Helmreich, 1992).

Growth

In some cases, people can experience positive change as a result of overcoming challenges and crises, as expressed in the aphorism “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Examples include:

- **Cancer survivors gain new perspective:** A brush with death reportedly leaves many survivors with altered priorities, a richer spirituality, and a greater appreciation of each day (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).
- **Coping with challenges strengthens coping ability:** Hardship short of trauma can boost mental toughness (Seery, 2011). The opposite — growing up amid affluence — can elevate risks of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Lund & Dearing, 2012; Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013).
- **Challenges that beget growth:** Skilled athletes, entertainers, students, and teachers thrive and excel — and grow in skill — when challenged (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010). And sometimes failure is the parent of success. In late 2018, after being the first #1 seed NCAA-tournament men’s basketball team to lose to a lowly #16 seed, “a soul-crushing embarrassment,” University of Virginia coach Tony Bennett reflected, “If you learn to use adversity right, it can take you to a place you couldn’t have gone any other way” (Feinstein, 2018). In 2019, as if scripted by Hollywood, Virginia won the national championship, leading one jester to tweet: “Bennett sabotaging his 1 seed last year to humble them and motivate them was next level coaching. Can’t wait to see the copycat coaches follow his lead in years to come.”

So, there are circumstances when adversity begets harmful impairment, stable resilience, and positive growth. But, Infurna and Jayawickreme ask, how common is each — and in what situations do they occur? When is adversity injurious, and when does it come with a silver lining? And even if “all things work together for [some] good,” can we differentiate the good from the bad consequences? Might some adversity, for example, promote empathy and compassion, while harming health and happiness?

Although human adaptation enables remarkable resilience, the point can be overstated. Studies that track lives over time reveal that, following divorce, job loss, or a spouse’s death, people’s well-being does rebound — but often to a point short of their pre-adversity status (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Infurna & Luthar, 2016; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). Moreover, Infurna and Jayawickreme note problems with trusting people’s autobiographical recall of their own growth.

To illustrate both the research topic and the methodological issues, instructors can invite students to write answers to two questions:

1. In your own life, what adversity have you experienced? Have you faced a severe stress, a significant loss, a disheartening disappointment, or a difficult hardship?
2. Looking back, did that adversity harm you? Were you resilient (unchanged)? Or are you, in some way, stronger for it?

Alternatively, instructors might ask: “Imagine asking people with depression if they felt better compared with 6 months ago. Is that a valid method for measuring depression? Why or why not?”

Some autobiographical stories will be too personal to share. Perhaps a few who feel comfortable doing so might briefly share their example of adversity and their response to it. Given studies showing that some 9 in 10 adolescents “report growth following adversity,” most will likely tell such stories.

Without discounting or insulting the authenticity of anyone’s story — “Adversity sometimes does beget growth, and we can consider these genuine instances of that” — instructors can also ask students why some researchers (including Infurna and Jayawickreme) hesitate to rely exclusively on people’s retrospective testimonials. Doing so assumes that people can accurately recall who they used to be, how they differ from their former self, and the source of any change.

Indeed, consider what we have learned from participants in programs that target weight control, smoking cessation, academic support, brain training, and delinquency prevention. By constructing a memory of how bad they used to be and touting how good they are now, clients typically testify to substantial growth. This justifies their expenditure of time, effort, and resources — even when clinical trials reveal no therapeutic benefit. As D. R. Wixon and James Laird (1976) have observed, “The speed, magnitude, and certainty [with which people revise their own histories] is striking.” Thus, to judge by testimonials, even ineffective therapies seem to promote growth.

The Socratic instructor might ask: “Given that we cannot experiment with adversity by randomly assigning some people to trauma, what methodology would allow us to better discern how often adversity actually produces harm, resilience, and growth?”

Ideally, say Infurna and Jayawickreme, longitudinal research would compare people “before and after adversity” and with multiple outcome measures. By so doing, we can better understand when, to what extent, and how adversity produces harm, resilience, and growth.

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