

ACTIVITY: Adversity and Growth

In his novel ***A Farewell to Arms***, Ernest Hemingway wrote "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." A more well-known version of this sentiment is Nietzsche's "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger."

These quotes speak to the concept of growth from adversity, which is at the heart of resiliency. Although the concept is not new, psychologists and researchers didn't really start studying this topic until the 1990's. Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun coined the term "post-traumatic growth" to describe positive change that is experienced as the result of a major life crisis or trauma.

Whether our struggles are "major traumas", or the general challenges and suffering that all of us will experience, each of us has the opportunity to recognize positive effects that have come from adversity.

To clarify, this doesn't mean that trauma is good or that even the most resilient people won't experience suffering or need time to heal. Rather, knowing that adversity and suffering are part of the human experience, and knowing that our human tendency is to put more weight on the negative, this is another way to recognize positive aspects of life that we often don't pay attention to.

To quote happiness researcher Tal Ben-Shabar, "Things do not necessarily happen for the best, but some people are able to make the best out of things that happen."

Try This:

Think of a negative event in your life, something that caused you pain, stress, anxiety, or anger. Try to identify any positive effects that may have happened because of this experience.

Did you:

- Discover a strength you didn't know you had?
- Appreciate some thing (or things) in your life more than before?
- Improve an important relationship or end a bad one?
- Get better at communicating your feelings (or improve some other aspect of communication)?
- Gain confidence or become braver?
- Become more compassionate, forgiving, or understanding?
- Repair or strengthen a relationship?
- Identify any of your own shortcomings that could be improved?

- 1) **59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot** by Richard Wiseman (2009).
- 2) Post-traumatic Growth Research Group. Website: <https://ptgi.uncc.edu/>



ACTIVITY: Adversity and Growth

ESTIMATED TIME

15 minutes or longer
depending on discussion

MATERIALS

Required:

- A. Pen and paper if done individually
- B. Whiteboard or flip chart if looking at group challenge

Champion/ Facilitator's Notes

- If facilitating this activity with a team, sharing personal experiences should be voluntary and may best be done in small groups or pairs. Consider your team's culture and relationships.
- Another option for this activity is to have your group apply this concept and activity to a challenge the team is going through (or a recent past or future challenge). As a group, can you identify positives that have come – or may come – from this challenge?

Discussion Questions

- Was it difficult or easy to find a positive outcome from your negative experience?
- Have you thought about positive outcomes for negative events in your life before or was this a new experience?
- How could this exercise be useful moving forward?
- What stories have you heard of people who have experienced post-traumatic growth?
- Research shows that post-traumatic growth (positive change after a major trauma) isn't universal. Why do you think this happens for some people but not others?
- Some writers and/or researchers suggest that while people may report positive growth after trauma, their behavior doesn't change. Why might this occur?