



e-quilibrium

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Benefit Finding

"I wouldn't want to have to go through that again, but it might be the best thing that happened to me." "I wouldn't wish that on anyone else, but I now realize what's really important in life." "I wasn't aware that it was happening, but I've grown a lot through this ordeal." Such comments are occasionally heard from persons who have experienced hardship, significant health problems, trauma, or misfortune.

Folk wisdom suggests that "every cloud has a silver lining," that is, that there is some good to be found in negative events. Certainly life contains adversity, and given that we can't go back and change circumstances after the fact, it does behoove us to look for opportunities as we cope with adversity. This may include learning from mistakes, indentifying new directions, and/or recommitting ourselves to values/priorities.

It is well established that stressful life events can have negative health consequences. Does the process of benefit-finding (also referred to as "post-traumatic growth" or "stress-related growth") have health benefits? Not surprisingly, benefit-finding is associated with better mental health. What about physical health?

Several psychologists from the University of California system (Los Angeles and San Francisco) reviewed the research in this area and found that individuals who are able to find benefits through adversity appear to subsequently have better physical health, compared to those not discovering such benefits. This pattern has been found among patients with heart disease, HIV, and cancer. They hypothesize that the better

health can be attributed to the reduced impact of stress. Specifically, they note differences in how stressors are viewed, in the degree of confidence about managing stressors, in the quality of relationships with others, and in personal priorities and goals. Furthermore, benefit finding is associated with more positive emotional states, which themselves have been associated with better health. All of these factors likely affect health behaviors as well, in a positive direction.

None of this is to suggest that the profound effects of negative life events should be minimized, or that grief and the associated emotions should be avoided. Rather, it is to suggest that discovering potential opportunities and/or positive effects in the face of adversity can be a beneficial component of adapting to and coping with negative events or circumstances. Not only can this enhance subsequent quality of life, it also appears to contribute to better health.

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