

Ground Zero-scale trauma can prompt psychological growth

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People who live through an extreme traumatic experience such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or an airplane crash often have the capacity to bounce back or even grow to a higher level of functioning and personal strength, according to a University at Buffalo researcher and expert in the effects of horrifying trauma.

And at the heart of these extensive findings is a surprisingly optimistic conclusion: Most people recover well following devastating events, and even among those who struggle with the experience, many of them can find some benefit from the experience, despite the negative effects of the event in their lives.

"Even when people go through a horrible life-threatening event, or endure huge losses and very difficult circumstances, many of them actually find some positive aspects to the experience and are able to grow from it." says Lisa D. Butler, associate professor in UB's School of Social Work, whose multiple studies on the trauma following 9/11 and other severely disruptive life events have been published in numerous professional journals, including the April issue of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*.

"That does not negate the pain of what they have been through or the lingering effects in their lives, by any means," Butler says. "But there is room for some positive changes as well."

Butler has been instrumental in research that concluded there were a

number of qualities associated with people who were resilient in the face of devastating events beyond their control. She also found that others reported positive changes in their lives from living through such ordeals.

Butler's research has found that the qualities that are common to people who are the most resilient include:

- Less [emotional](#) control. Those able to recover well shared a willingness to express [sadness](#) or pain in a reasonable way. Those who tamped their emotions down inside were less able to get beyond the toxic effects of their [tragedy](#).
- Less catastrophic views of the world. Those who avoided interpreting the tragedy as confirmation of a bleak and unforgiving world were less distressed in the both immediate and longer term by the experience.
- Social support, both personal and within a community. Those enduring these devastating losses with a network of people supportive to their needs were more apt to survive their grief and find hidden reserves. The survivors who were able to turn to these interpersonal resources were also those more able to discuss their psychological pain in an open manner.
- Less media exposure. Those who watched repeated images of the same monstrous calamity over time, such as the World Trade Center attacks, tended to have higher feelings of distress than those who watched fewer.

"When we put these factors in an equation to examine how well they predict levels of distress, we find that together they are very good predictors of whether a person recovers," says Butler. "But we also find

that the strongest factor seems to be whether the person developed a negative world view -- if they did, then it appeared to undermine the person's ability to overcome the traumatic event." For example, in one of Butler's studies, participants were asked whether a series of negative and pessimistic beliefs about the world ("My life has no meaning" or "I don't look forward to the future anymore") applied to them. And those who reported a significantly more pessimistic world outlook also experienced higher levels of what the researchers called "distress."

As well, even among people who were the most highly distressed right after the event, those who found positive aspects to the experience were often able to grow from it over time, according to Butler.

"This kind of an event often opens up possibilities for people to improve their relationships with others, for example," says Butler. "They may also come to realize they are stronger than they realized or they feel an enhanced appreciation for life. And in some cases they may become more spiritual.

"In my view, looking at resilience and growth following something as shattering as 9/11 is, in a way, positive psychology meeting [trauma](#) psychology. It's a way of finding something good in what happened."

Butler joined the UB faculty in January, after doing her research at Stanford University's School of Medicine. She was hired at UB to strengthen the university's research focus on "extreme events" as part of the UB 2020 strategic planning initiative.

She is currently studying the effects of people enduring the threat of living in fear.

Source: University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

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