

Psychologists: Scrooge's transformation parallels real life-changing experiences

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Psychologists studied 14 people who had sudden life-changing experiences. They say Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation fits right in. George Bailey from "It's a Wonderful Life" is another realistic movie character who embodies sudden change.

"Bah, humbug!" is the line most closely associated with Ebenezer Scrooge, the famous miser from "A Christmas Carol."

But the authors of a new study on life-changing experiences give author [Charles Dickens](#) high marks for his portrayal of Scrooge's sudden switch to saintliness.

Former grad student Jon Skalski and Brigham Young University [psychology professor](#) Sam Hardy conducted an in-depth study of 14 people who experienced profound, sudden and lasting change. They say the fictional Scrooge would fit right in.

"Like our participants, Scrooge was suffering," Skalski said. "There was disintegration. There was a world that was ripe for change because of suffering going on."

Though Scrooge had money, he hit rock bottom in terms of relationships. Orphaned as a child and broken-hearted from a failed engagement, Scrooge's pains intensify each Christmas Eve, the anniversary of the death of his only friend, Jacob Marley.

In the story, Marley appears seven years after his death as a voice of warning. Though a ghost, the role he plays is true to life. Most [study participants](#) described the presence of a trusted other person during their experience.

"Just by their presence, a trusted friend can open up possibilities and a sense of faith in what's possible that one can't see," Skalski said.

Skalski and Hardy's research will appear in the January issue of *The Humanistic Psychologist*. Finding people that fit the criteria was no easy task. To do so, they employed ads on Craigslist in Illinois and Utah.

Notably, the experiences shared by the participants were not recent events. On average, nine years had passed between the transformation and their interview. Most of them could remember the exact time of day when the turning point occurred.

"I've often thought about this, whether these transformations are really sudden or gradual," Skalski said. "It's like water boiling – you can look at that as a discontinuous change from not boiling to boiling, but there are certain elements going on beneath the surface that allow for the dramatic change to take place."

For an entrepreneur referred to as Kevin in the study, the preceding turmoil arose because his identity as a successful businessman crashed along with his failed ventures. Like Scrooge, he had neglected relationships and said his psyche was "in a very dark place."

But with his breakthrough moment, life instantly took on a whole new meaning for Kevin.

"I say it's the best thing that could've happened, because my life is so much more rewarding than it once was. You can't put a price tag on

certain...events that I maybe missed before – certain events, and a marriage, and a family, birthdays, you know? Certain things that are just really fun to be a part of are more meaningful, and it is happiness – the kind that lasts. I know these truths have been around forever. But for me they're new."

Similarly, another participant's world crumbled because she based her worth on how well she did in school. Like Scrooge and Kevin, she emerged with a focus on other people.

"Now I measure success by my – how much time I spend serving and doing those things, because those – serving and being with people – are really what bring me satisfaction now."

Each of the study participants experienced overwhelming stress prior to their breakthrough. Hardy, an expert in human development, wonders whether hitting rock bottom is a necessary ingredient for such positive transformations.

"That led me to think, well, is there a way that people can capitalize on these mechanisms of change and initiate them themselves instead of bottoming out," Hardy said. "Can you self-initiate this kind of change?"

Skalski sees another holiday parallel with his research in the film "It's a Wonderful Life." After planning to end his life, George Bailey realizes how other people depend on him in Bedford Falls, prompting his famous line, "I want to live again!"

"Those stories are stuck within our culture," Skalski said. "We all know deep down inside that human beings can and do change in profound and significant ways."

Provided by Brigham Young University

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