

How people cope with difficult life events fuels development of wisdom, study finds

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Carolyn Aldwin is director of the Center for Healthy Aging Research in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University. Credit: Oregon State University

How a person responds to a difficult life event such as a death or divorce

helps shape the development of their wisdom over time, a new study from Oregon State University suggests.

For many, the difficult life event also served to disrupt their sense of personal meaning, raising questions about their understanding of their world. These disruptions ultimately lead to the development of new wisdom, said Carolyn Aldwin, director of the Center for Healthy Aging Research in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at OSU. "The adage used to be 'with age comes wisdom,' but that's not really true," said Aldwin, an expert on psychosocial factors that influence aging. "Generally, the [people](#) who had to work to sort things out after a difficult life event are the ones who arrived at new meaning."

The findings were just published in the *Journals of Gerontology: Series B*. The paper's lead author is Heidi Igarashi, who worked on the research as part of the dissertation for her doctorate at OSU; co-author is Michael R. Levenson of OSU.

The goal of the study was to better understand how wisdom develops in the context of adversity such as death of a loved one, divorce, health crisis, or loss of job. Understanding how people cope with adversity and develop wisdom provides insight into healthy aging, Aldwin said. "What we're really looking at is 'when bad things happen, what happens?'" Aldwin said. "The event can become a catalyst for changes that come afterward."

Igarashi reviewed interviews with 50 adults ages 56 to 91 who had experienced one or more significant difficult life events. The participants were asked to identify a specific difficult or challenging life event, describe how they coped, and describe whether the experience changed their outlook or actions in life.

"One thing that stood out right away is that, when asked to think about a

difficult life event or challenge, people had an answer right away," Aldwin said. "Difficult times are a way people define themselves." The researchers found that people responded to the difficult life situations in three ways. For one group of respondents, 13 in all, the difficult life event led to little or no questioning of meaning in their life. Part of the people in this group simply accepted the event as something that could not be changed, while the remainder described using their intelligence, self-control and planning to solve problems related to the event.

The smallest group, five participants, indicated that the difficult life event helped them clarify a specific value or belief that had not previously been articulated.

The majority of the participants - 32 - indicated that the difficult life event disrupted their personal meaning and prompted the person to reflect on themselves, their fundamental beliefs and their understanding of the world.

"For these folks, the event really rocked their boat and challenged how they saw life and themselves," Aldwin said.

Further analysis showed that a person's social environment helped to shape their responses to the difficult life event. These social interactions included: enlisting help from others during the difficult time; unsolicited emotional support from family, friends or strangers; being held or holding, particularly among people sharing a difficult life event such as a loss; receiving unwanted support; comparing one's reaction to the event with the reactions of others; seeking expert advice; seeking out others with similar experiences; making new connections; and learning from society at large.

The researchers found that some of these social supports and interactions influenced a person's development of wisdom. Those who received

unsolicited emotional support, for example, developed wisdom around compassion and humility. Seeking others with similar experiences exposed some participants to new ideas and interactions, supporting deeper exploration of their new sense of self.

"It mattered whether a participant was expected to adjust to the event quickly and 'get back to life,' or whether they were encouraged to grow and change as a result of the event," Igarashi said. "The quality of the social interactions really make a difference."

The findings provide new insight into the role of social support and interaction in developing [wisdom](#), she said. The challenge for now is to determine how best to ensure that people are accessing the social supports they need to cope and grow from significant [life](#) challenges.

"Typically, the type of social support you get is the kind you ask for and allow, and there is no 'one size fits all' approach," Igarashi said. "But being open to the resources in your social network, or seeking out things like grief support groups may be worth exploring."

More information: Heidi Igarashi et al, The Development of Wisdom: A Social Ecological Approach, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gby002](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gby002)

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