

Resilient people have lessons to offer, and researchers are listening

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We have different capacities for facing trauma and adversity, and USC researchers are exploring why. Credit: Kouichi Chiba

What is resilience? And why can trauma and stress leave one person reeling, while someone else may coast through the same troubles with

just a shrug and a smile?

That's the heart of the research conducted at the Resilience Lab at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. The scientists there are studying groups that range from troubled youth to cancer survivors to understand how we succeed at life despite significant adversity.

"Everyone has the goal of survival, but most people are trying to do better than just survive, despite or even because of life challenges," said Thalida "Em" Arpawong, a research assistant professor at the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and a member of the Resilience Lab faculty. "I want to see who is succeeding at doing better, and for longer, in terms of their emotional and cognitive health. And I want to find out how they are doing it."

Resilience research: Why do we thrive?

Resilience research has been growing for about four decades. Researchers in the 1970s noticed that some children in tough circumstances seemed to thrive, and they wanted to know why. Psychologists started by studying kids, but now resilience research has branched out to understand resilience in adults, young and old, and even among whole populations.

At USC, Arpawong and her colleague Joel Milam have been looking at how people respond to trauma. Some people emerge from tragedy and horror with post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), the researchers said. Yet others recover well from trauma and even flourish.

"In my class, in most talks on this topic that I do, if I say, "Who here is familiar with PTSD?", just about everyone's hands goes up," said Milam, associate professor of research preventive medicine at the Keck School. "Then if I ask, "Are you familiar with post-traumatic growth?" maybe

two or three hands go up. Well, PTSD is the less likely outcome. Post-traumatic growth and resiliency are the norm."

Post-traumatic growth is what happens, Arpawong said, "when people undergo a life-altering, profound experience that they perceive as negative, but ultimately, they find a way to thrive and do better than expected, given these experiences." Milam's research shows that survivors of childhood cancer, for instance, are likely to report that cancer had some positive impacts on their plans for their future. Their parents, however, were more likely to do poorly after recovery. That could be because their children's cancer derailed their own plans and often affected their finances, he said.

Beyond pop culture, what is resilience?

The path to post-traumatic growth is paved with [resilience](#). In pop culture terms, that means bouncing back from something challenging. Scientifically speaking, Arpawong said, "it's a positive response process to some type of challenge or adversity." And that happens when people are able to manage specific stressors in their lives and put purpose to them.

Lowering stress involves activating what's called the [parasympathetic nervous system](#), Milam said. That's the system of nerves that enable people to "rest and digest." One immediate way to do that, in the face of a stressful situation, is to take a long, slow, deep breath. That simple step can slow down your heart rate, he said. Longer-term techniques include starting a meditation practice, as well as practicing mindfulness by slowing down and noticing what is going on around you. "With the fostering of attention and present moment awareness, a lot of these pathways to greater well-being become more attainable," he said.

Journaling also can help. People who are struggling can reframe their

own story—and where they're headed in their life—by seeing their experience in a different, more positive light. One example is a question Milam and colleagues have used in their interviews with [cancer survivors](#). They ask, "Some people say that they have found some benefit in their struggle with cancer. Given what happened to you (or your family), do you think that this is possible? If yes, how so?"

Why some communities are uniquely resilient

Some communities tend to produce more resilient members than others, and researchers are studying why. Latinos, for instance, are more likely than others to grow after experiencing trauma, Milam said. Many Latinos come from communities that value [religious faith](#) and family. Faith and strong family connections are linked to post-traumatic growth, he said, probably because they tend to translate into a solid support network for someone who is struggling.

Ultimately, the most resilient people are those who come into a trauma well prepared, he said. These "thrivers" have strong support networks. They also put setbacks into perspective, and troubles don't sway them from their long-term goals. As Milam puts it, "You have meaning in life."

But even without strong support, it's still possible to turn trauma into something positive, Arpawong said. Successful stress management programs strive to help people see traumatic events within the scope of their whole lives. The idea is to incorporate these events into their life story rather than trying to ignore them and push on forward. Ultimately, she said, the goal is for [people](#) "to recognize their own strength in having gone through this, gaining along the way a greater sense of spirituality, engaging more in activities they find interesting, and changing the direction of their lives as a result."

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