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How Adversity Shapes Character

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Abstract

The role in which adversity plays in shaping one's character, resilience and endurance is one that society shuns and often neglects. It has been a norm with the increase of motivational talks, inspirational quotes of digital media and life coaching of the new age to suppress the feeling in pursuit of joy and happiness. This has seen an increase in depression and suicides across the globe. The embracing of adverse situations continues to be an interpretation of weakness and an embrace of negativity. This chapter will explore how the avoidance of adversity prevents humanity the pleasures of gaining rich roots of character and the gaining of virtues that encompass courage, grace and resilience. The chapter will conclude by emphasising that the absence of adversity or the suppression of it thereof minimises spiritual, emotional and psychological growth.

Keywords: adversity, courage, resilience, character, grace

1. Introduction

Adversity can be defined as an unfavourable fortune, incident or fate; a condition marked by misfortune, calamity or distress. It is inevitable that in our lifetime, we will undergo adverse situations and circumstances, and learning to embrace these situations with grace and dignity can be beneficial for our personal journeys. Rich roots of character can be developed when learning to embrace adverse situations life throws, when one learns to ask which lessons can be derived from their misfortunes and every adversity has a distinct and unique lesson that can only be learned when the adversity is embraced. It is also important to be patient with oneself as they learn to familiarise themselves with the adverse situation, while learning to embrace the situation. The first step is to always accept what the status quo is, refrain from denying the situation for what it is and denial is the biggest delayer in healing. Once one's mind, heart and body have fully accepted the adverse situation, healing comes and a new and fresh perspective is developed. New and fresh perspective brings wisdom, each time you face another challenging time, you can draw from the pool of wisdom gained from previous adverse situations. Author and blogger, Bridges [1] suggests four positive attributes on embracing adversity.

1. One develops a deeper understanding about themselves and how the world works.
2. One hones their creativity; Bridges suggests when faced with adverse situations, one is aware that sitting and crying about it will not bring much solutions, the seeking of a remedy to the situations is how one becomes creative, he suggests that the absence of adversity would not challenge one's creative flair.

3. One is able to see people's true colours-real friend's surface. Bridges suggests that although adverse situations can be painful and daunting, they can be viewed and deemed as blessings in disguise, no matter how independent one is, you'll need people and its often in the most adverse of times will one's true friends be revealed.
4. One finds more courage to stand-alone. Bridges suggests that, although adverse times will need you to surround yourself with friends and loved ones, the decision to get up and dust yourself up is your decision, and the decision to stand firmly will only come from you. In this instance, one truly learns the art of a strong will and self-control; both these traits build character.

2. Adversity virtues

Although the chapter deals with embracing adverse situations, drawing strength from them and finding positive traits and values is to build character. Let us not run away from the reality that adverse situations are painful, stressful and give anxiety; it would be bogus to ignore the fact that adverse situations can often be uncomfortable. This may lead one into depression and despair, finding courage in such situations does come across as farfetched and impossible, but it is very possible to turn lemons into lemonade. Turning lemons into lemonade, adverse situations into positive lessons takes courage. Courage is not easy, courage takes emotional strength and a deep sense of emotional intelligence, and it is a decision, a deliberate choice that takes immense character. When we choose courage, we understand that it either may be very beneficial or may backfire. If for example one was involved in a motorcycle accident, which may have been fatal, it takes immense courage to go back onto a motor cycle again, and it is crucial to know that the courage taken may be either successful or unsuccessful. However, if one persists in seeking the successful output, success is what you will get in the end; it takes time.

Another example is a break up. Building a relationship after a traumatic breakup may seem like trauma and can be very daunting, taking bold courageous steps at finding love again can be either successful or unsuccessful, and if the latter is the outcome, time and persistent courage will bring successful results. In the introduction, I stated that the surrounding of people who you love and trust makes the adverse situation bearable as they aid you with comfort and advice. Those very people are instrumental in birthing out the courageous virtue within us when feeling weak and in doubt, their encouragement and never wavering support is vital in awakening the courage that is needed to overcome adverse situations. Courage brings about confidence and resilience, depriving ourselves of these attributes is an injustice to our healing and closure. It takes courage to have courage itself, the ability to make a stern decision to be courageous when everything screams the opposite, is courage in its very nature.

Although a strong support of people is important in facing adverse situations, it does take you to make that decision. One can have all the advice and support in the world, but if it is not your decision, you will never find courage. The Greek philosopher Aristotle believes courage to be the most important human virtue. "Courage is the first of human virtues because it makes all others possible." When we are courageous, we take the first bold step at facing our unfavourable situations and circumstances, and without courage, there can be no healing or overcoming adverse situations; it cannot be skipped or ran away from. Having courage enables us to face fear head on and helps us to face the unknown until it is known. Fear itself can

be the most crippling emotion that prevents us from moving forward and finding healing. According to Australian academic press, courage enables us to develop a psychological muscle. This muscle assists us when in need of resilience and strength to overcome or avoid adversity. The more we make use of this muscle, the more empowered we become to confront problems head on and be courageous in challenging times that fill us with immense pain and despair. Courage is not a virtue that we are born with, it is not instant and automatic, it is a virtue one learns, and with consistency and practice, it becomes stronger. There is no individual who has automated courage in their bloodline or DNA; all of us are on a human journey and experience, and learn to be courageous through adverse and unfortunate circumstances. Courage is a demanding virtue because it requires persistence, it requires one to want it and if one does not persist stubbornly at attaining it, it simply will not come.

Australian academic press [2] emphasises that courage is not an instinctive response, like breathing or swallowing. If that was how courage worked, our reactions would be consistent and our feelings predictable. This would mean our responses and reactions would be meaningless. Courage is reactive and differs with each unique situation. There cannot be courage without fear, and for courage to show up, fear must be present. Courage exists because fear exists. Courage cannot be forced, courage is a personal decision that must be taken wilfully, and without it, adverse situations cannot be overcome.

Overcoming adverse situations requires a high level of grace from a higher power beyond yourself and a certain level from within yourself. Prayer and meditation may channel adverse circumstances into a positive light and may be able to shed a deep and meaningful perspective of your situation. Many have attested to the power of prayer, and the role a spiritual connection has played in healing and finding closure in an adverse situation. Others have attested that meditation has assisted them in channelling their emotions, and consolidating what it is they feel. Grace that comes from above is a grace that cannot be attained from any human, it is a divine and sustaining grace that gives you strength in helpless and adverse times, and through this level of grace, one is able to attain a level of grace within themselves to go on and when everything around them is falling apart. A willing heart, a heart that has the courage and tenacity to overcome, can only attain grace.

One has got to reach out for it, it does not simply come. When one reaches out to a higher power, the higher power is able to extend its grace upon them. Although the first step is courage, the absence of grace can make the experience bitter and very painful. A support system both in the physical sense and in a spiritual sense is very important. Granted, not all of us believe in a higher power, but the reality is we did not create ourselves, there has to be a force higher and greater than ourselves and often we can find healing and deep comfort in adverse situations. In our pursuit of grace from above to handle adverse situations, we gain clarity and understanding, adversity has a way of stripping away level headed thinking and often leaves one bitter and negative in how they think or approach the situation at hand. Grace leaves one better not bitter, and when you feel rejuvenated, one is able to make level headed decisions that lead to a positive outcome, it gives you a better understanding of the situation at hand, and it gives one peace. Ultimately, one's greatest strength, deep courage, grace and resilience will come effectively when one finds purpose in the adversity, often purpose stems from a power that is higher and greater than oneself.

Death, a break up, a job loss or even a fatal car accident are some adverse examples, these and many others are able to birth resilience characteristics within. The American psychological association suggests 10 ways in which adverse situations build resilience.

1. Adverse situations help in making good connections. The association suggests that a healthy relationship with friends, family and colleagues can build a resilience character within one. It also suggests that joining faith-based organisations can assist in strengthening character and resilience.
2. Avoid seeing your crisis as insurmountable problems. The association suggests that one cannot avoid adverse situations, but one has to learn to see beyond them and draw strength from these situations, this they suggest builds resilience.
3. Accept that change is part of living. This the association suggests as the first step at dealing with adverse situations to find healing and assist in gaining resilience.
4. Move toward your goals. Building a resilient character will require you to make necessary steps in doing so. Finding a hobby or something healthy to occupy your mind during an adverse situation is what will bring about a positive mind-set, ultimately birthing resilience.
5. Take decisive actions. Do not detach yourself from the situations, feel it and go through it. Take decisive actions that work toward healing.
6. Look for opportunities for self-discovery. Many people who have gone through trying times and experienced the most adverse situations have a better knowledge of self and are living fulfilled lives. Many of them have a heightened spiritual insight and are emotionally and mentally strong as they have chosen to be proactive in finding resilience.
7. Nurture a positive view of self. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.
8. Maintain a hopeful outlook. Try visualising what you want the end goal to be and not what you are currently going through. Adverse situations often cloud you into believing that it is over, but when you focus on what you want to feel and not what you are currently feeling, you'll find peace and adapt a resilient nature.
9. Take care of yourself. There is a phase where one is allowed to be selfish. Do what makes you happy, exercise and keep your mind occupied with positive activities and engagements, and this will keep you level headed and resilient.
10. Keep things in perspective. It is very easy during adverse situations to blow things out of proportion. Keep things into perspective and always keep a level-headed demeanour. Writing things down helps track your emotions and keeps things in perspective for a resilient and better you.

The aim is to thrive and not to break at adversity. Resilience is far less than being strong and more about how one thinks says Razzetti [3] and further suggests that building resilience requires more than grit. William Ward is quoted in saying; "Adversity causes some men to break; others to break records" (Ward). This is proven beyond reasonable doubt to be true. How many stories do we know of iconic human beings who went through adverse situations and came out victorious and living hero's today? Nelson Mandela is an icon that instantly comes to mind, and he was detained and imprisoned for over two decades, separated from his family and his iconic wife, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and their children. He was denied

permission to bury his beloved mother and first born son, he was tormented mentally and emotionally and yet he was able to reconcile all races and the entire country, although he receives backlash for this even after his death, he is still revered and lauded throughout the world. Not many people would endure the immense adversity and pain Nelson Mandela endured but, his resilient spirit, his graceful spirit and courage led him to forgive. Psychiatrist Wolin [4] defines resiliency as the capacity to rise above adversity. We have to be able to tell ourselves when things go wrong that the situation cannot take over our lives, this too shall pass.

Psychologist Emmy Werner [5] spent over 40 years studying children from disadvantaged, unstable and chaotic families. Despite their adverse circumstances, 30% of the children grew up to become successful students and adults, astonishingly many surpassed peers from more privileged backgrounds. Resilience is a choice. Much as the other previously mentioned traits such as courage and grace, resilience too require one to make a purposeful and intentional decision to adapt. The study by Werner had the following outputs; most of the children succeeded because of self-control, they made a decision that they would not allow their backgrounds and environment to define them. Studies have shown that spiritual support, cultural rituals prepare individuals for some of the most adverse conditions and situations. Resilience requires discipline, like courage; it is not a trait you are born with, it is one that you have to work on daily. This does not mean that one will never have a breaking point, even the most resilient of people break at some point. Razzetti emphasises that resilience is critical to recover from everyday adverse events, not just from traumatic ones. Positively restructuring our relationship with reality moves us through grief. Denial and acceptance are necessary steps in finally grasping resilience by the foot. Resilience is far less than the actual adverse event but rather how you adapt to it. Zoli [6] states that resilience is a dynamic combination of optimism, creativity and confidence, and we can turn adverse situations into something meaningful by focusing on learning, not on the experience itself. Kobasa [7] detailed three critical components required in resilience; challenge, commitment and self-control.

1. Challenge. Resilient people turn a difficult situation into a challenge, instead of fighting reality and being in denial about it. They focus more on finding meaning and lessons.
2. Commitment. The drive and zeal of having to fight for something is what fuels resilient people. Having a mission greater than your adverse situation gives you motivation.
3. Self-control. It is ludicrous to believe one can control every single event under the sun, but one can control their emotions and decisions. Resilient individuals have mastered this trait and thus, find meaning and purpose even during the most adverse of times.

Razzetti suggests five ways to build a mind-set of an individual undergoing an adverse period.

1. Reframe your thoughts. He suggests that controlling situations in your life are impossible but controlling your emotions and responses is something you have control of. He suggests cognitive restructuring as a practical way to think about adverse situations. He states that calming oneself to identify the real situation and assess one's emotions and thoughts. He also states that identifying evidence that supports how you feel and also those who contradict your feelings, helps you reframe your thoughts.

2. Prepare for the worst. He suggests that you cannot prepare your heart and mind to deal with every possible situation, but one can prepare their mind to adapt when adverse situations arise. He states that one should not be afraid to expose themselves to rejections as it prepares you for trying times.
3. Create alternative paths. Creativity as previously mentioned plays a major role when overcoming adversity. Learning to navigate yourself out of unfavourable situations, creativity also stretches your brain, instead of seeing adverse situations as hurdles; your mind turns them into positive challenges. Razzetti also suggests humour as an important role in finding positive solutions. Laughing reduces tensions.
4. Leverage the power of relationships. Strong and solid relationships are once again encouraged during adverse times; no one no matter how in denial we are can succeed alone. Collaboration and association is vital in the healing process. Relationships according to Razzetti foster resilience, resilient people do the actual give-and take work necessary to get emotional gratification from others.
5. Mind your spirit. Razzetti also agrees that religious and spiritual support brings us comfort during adversity. Medication too he suggests as a positive tool in challenging ones emotions. Religious and spiritual activities provide strength that comes from being part of a community. Razzetti is resolute that resilience is not a fixed trait-one can learn and develop through time. Bouncing back and returning to your feet depends solely on you. Learning to control your emotions and thoughts helps to train your mind to face everyday hardships. Only your mind can heal what your mind created.

3. Suppression of adverse situations, deprives healing

Suppressing emotions and experiences often seems like the most comfortable thing to do at times, nobody enjoys feeling pain, it does not matter how strong you are as an individual. However, when dealing with adverse situations, it is rather wise to go through the experience and face it head on. Some of our most valuable lessons are often gained at the most adverse of times and running away from the situation will only deprive you of your own healing and the gaining of rich lessons that will build your character.

As previously mentioned that adverse situations are often healed by a spiritual experience but spirituality does not only bring healing, it also brings lessons. We learn lessons about our maker, a higher power other than ourselves and ourselves. Deffner [8] points out five sources of spiritual adversities, when engaging with our spirituality, we will often look at our adverse situations spiritually and not physically. Deffner points out the following:

1. The Devil. If there is a higher power that brings light, surely there must be a force that brings darkness and whatever religion one may ascribe to, the devil or a dark force is often referred a lot in bringing evil and adversity. Spirituality emphasises that when we seek light or begin to follow a higher power, evil principalities often come into play and begin to be in opposition of your spiritual journey and awakening.
2. Other people. Spirituality no matter which faith, speaks about how people can persecute us, bring us pain and harm. Spirituality also tell us how to deal with

such instances and often compels us to forgive those who inflict us with pain, so that we may free ourselves from offence and deep rooted pain. Forgiveness is a very difficult thing to do, often we feel that unforgiveness is our power, if we forgive we feel weak and feel that the individual(s) who offended us will think we are on good terms with them or like what they did to us if we forgive. However, spirituality makes us know that forgiveness is liberating and the more we hold onto offence and a grudge, our sins will not be forgiven too.

3. Circumstances. Spirituality and religion is very clear that circumstances and life will happen, but offers solutions and help for our adverse situations. The joy that spirituality gives is the assurance that there is a higher power that will render aid in our most afflicting times and often advises that we pray for one another in adverse times. When we suppress our adversity, we lack lessons such as these that spirituality offers.
4. God/a higher power. Deffner argues that our power to deal with adversity comes from position and not a location. The closer we are to God, the better suited we will be to handle adversity in our life, when we are not close to our maker, we may find ourselves working against him. She states that, when God is our adversary, we find ourselves in the worst position to be in. When we are not close to God or our maker, he pours out his judgement. Another argument Deffner makes is that we meet adversity from God or our maker when he tries to work in an area of our life that makes us uncomfortable.
5. Soft Heart vs. Hard Heart. Deffner argues that spirituality offers us a solution to deal with individuals who inflict us with pain, contributing to our adversity. Often the solution is a less hardened heart, a heart that loves and a heart that is meek. Spirituality compels us to love those who hurt us, to pray for them and reach out to them when they go through situations they put us through too.

“Success is not our greatest achievement, but, rather our greatest achievement is facing a difficult life challenge with dignity and integrity”-Viktor Frankl. Adversity is inevitable in the human experience and we will experience tough times but it is how we deal with these tough times that matter. Some may choose to be negative and have a hardened heart because of adverse situations; some may walk out of the situation positively, having an enhanced personal growth. Ultimately, it is a choice, a choice only we can make for ourselves. Adversity can make us stronger emotionally if we choose to look at the experience positively; if one shuns the lessons brought by adverse situations, one may be depriving themselves of an experience of a lifetime that will strengthen their emotional endurance. They say what does not kill us makes us stronger, and psychologists have discovered a term called “posttraumatic growth” (PTG) which is a scientific construct that aims to capture positive transformations in beliefs and behaviour. PTG takes on five forms; improved relations with others, identification of new possibilities for one’s life, increased personal strength, spiritual change and enhanced appreciation of life. These qualities are derived after an adverse period in one’s life and if feelings are suppressed, one deprives themselves of the positive attributes gained through embracing the hardship and finding meaning. These attributes build character and encompass growth that produces diligence, generosity, love, purpose and humility. We ought to not deprive ourselves of the full healing that will bring us rich emotional strength and insight after we have experienced an adverse period.

Psychologically the mind can benefit too if suppression of adverse circumstances are not enforced. Stephen Joseph [9] from University of Nottingham states that

positive gain can come from suffering and shares that when individuals choose to look at the positive perspective of their adverse situation, and he states that adverse situations have 10 components and stages of growth following an adverse or tragic event. These stages are: assumptive world, trigger event, posttraumatic processing, confirmation of existing assumptions/disconfirmation of existing assumptions, accommodation/assimilation, positive/negative and new assumptive world. These stages are all experienced only when the adverse situation is not avoided and suppressed, when and if avoided, one deprives themselves of healing. Adverse situations must be fully embraced and fully experienced to avoid an emotional relapse and regression of progress. Johnson [10], a cognitive behaviour therapist, states that psychological growth after an adverse situation occurs not through the suffering itself, but through the individual's struggle and reconstruction of shattered assumptions. She alludes too many who may have experienced adversity, making dramatic life changes and positive shifts from adverse situations such as: a mother who may have lost a daughter in a drunk and driving accident, founds a mothers association against drunk and driving association. Another example is a rape survivor becoming a rape activist, both these are just examples of how individuals who went through very adverse and traumatic experiences made lemonade out of their lemons. The embracing of pain and adverse circumstances is not a negative trait to possess but rather a very power decision to make as it can benefit you in ways unimaginable.

4. Conclusion

With depression being at its peak, more and more suicides are being committed, the statistics worsen by each year. It is because new age media and social media has preached the wrong narrative, that immersing yourself in pain is toxic and that it is a sign of weakness, this sees many misinformed individuals running from their adverse circumstances, seeking comfort in alcohol and drugs, just to name a few. The narrative has got to change, and authors must preach the importance of immersing ourselves in our pains and adversities. Through this chapter, it has been revealed that adversity births courage, courage that makes us stronger, more confident and positive and, it is only adverse situations that allow courage. Through adversity one is able to extend their hands to a higher power for grace and sustenance and through this act of surrender can find grace within themselves to carry their adversities. Adversity also allows us the very important character trait of resilience; through resilience, one is able to be bolder and more level headed, one's character is strengthened and one is able to move on from very painful circumstances.

Adversity additionally gives us lessons of spirituality, when one goes to a power greater than themselves, they learn that some battles are not physical but rather spiritual. One gains insight on how to handle painful and unbearable circumstances, learn profound lessons of forgiveness and are able to carry burdens with grace. One also learns emotional strength, and one is able to endure circumstances with a level headed mind-set. When one suppresses adverse situations and merely runs away from them, they delay healing and deprive themselves of these rich and profound lessons that may have never be learned unless one went through adversity. One is also able to learn positive lessons that enhance their psychological makeup, lessons that add to the pools of their wisdom, that whenever one goes through situations, they can go draw from their pools. Maya Angelou [11] always says, "When you know better, you do better" and with adverse situations, we gain rich wisdom and are able to handle other more severe situations with a little more insight than the

ones we may have previously experienced [12]. One cannot control life happening to them, but can control how they react to these unfavourable situations. Adversity is not a curse, adversity is life's classroom, in which one learns, make mistakes and heal. There is always a light at the end of the tunnel but for that light to come one must make efforts to come out of the tunnel and that is why it is important to fully embrace adversity so as to not deprive ourselves of the lessons learned at the end.

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