

PSY 392 C/D: Fixing the Growth Illusion: New Directions for Research in Post-Traumatic Growth and Resilience

Monday/ Wednesday

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

The idea that struggle, trauma and adversity can be a catalyst for positive outcomes has a long intellectual history. Can adversity have an upside? Is there a purpose to suffering? Is it really the case that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger? Is suffering required for achieving a good life? Are the fruit of suffering greater well-being? New knowledge? Wisdom? What does the research tell us about the ubiquity of such changes, and can we trust the research? Is the idea of growth through suffering rooted in reality, or an attempt to justify the suffering in our world? Is it possible to intentionally promote growth following adversity? We will discuss these key questions in this class.

BACKGROUND

The question of how suffering can be reconciled in the context of a life well-lived has been a topic of great interest and concern for philosophers, religious thinkers, and laypeople alike. For example, in the context of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, how can a loving deity allow suffering in the world? One response to this question has been to argue for the potential upsides to experiencing suffering and adversity. For example, St. Paul memorably noted that "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5: 3-4). Indeed, the belief that adversity, challenge, failure and even trauma can lead to positive changes in individuals has held great intuitive appeal for many people. The popular meme, "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger" is ubiquitous enough a meme to be attributable to the popular musicians Kanye West, Kelly Clarkson or (originally) the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. More generally, icons such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King are admired in part because they are seen to have who are seen to have triumphed over adversity in achieving laudable moral goals.

Scientists have referred to these changes as "altruism born of suffering," "posttraumatic growth," "stress-related growth," or "benefit finding" (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006). The most popular term for this belief is *posttraumatic growth* (PTG), and research and writing on PTG has exploded in the last 15 years, in particular as a result of the advent of positive psychology. The psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1996) defined PTG as the positive psychological changes they had witnessed as clinical psychologists among their patients who

were coming to terms with traumatic life events. They found that people often reported experiencing positive changes since these events occurred; for example, people reported feeling better connected to the people around them and taking more pleasure in the small things in life. PTG seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon: 58-83% of survivors reporting that they changed in positive ways following a traumatic experience at least one domain of their lives. Theories of posttraumatic growth view the experienced trauma as the catalyst for fostering lasting personal growth.

However, this research program has proven to be controversial. Specifically, most research on this topic assesses positive *retrospective* changes individuals report following adversity as opposed to actual positive affective, cognitive and behavioral changes. Moreover, beliefs about growth may *not* be related to meaningful changes in behavior and may even lead to negative societal outcomes (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Infurna & Jayawickreme, 2019).

In short, the notion that adversity, trauma and suffering can lead to positive outcomes— is an idea that is both intuitively compelling and scientifically problematic. In this class, we will discuss the history of this idea, track its development in different cultural, religious and philosophical traditions, discuss its recent emergence as a popular topic with the advent of positive psychology and the wellness movement, critically evaluate current research on the topic, and discuss guidelines for how we should think about this phenomenon. In doing so, we will address the following questions:

1. What is resilience? What is posttraumatic growth? How are they different?
2. What does the research say about the benefits of adversity?
3. How good is the quality of the research on PTG?
4. Why is doing good science on “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” so challenging?
5. Why should we expect good outcomes from bad events? Are such beliefs culture-specific or religion-specific?
6. Can the expectation that one should see the upside of adversity be oppressive?

Course Objectives:

- Students will demonstrate increased competency in writing (both scientific and reflective) over the course of the semester.
- Students will articulate concepts and findings in psychological research on resilience and posttraumatic growth.
- Students will be able to identify and explain the role (and benefits/limits) of cultural narratives in promoting beliefs about posttraumatic growth in U.S. society.
- Students will articulate the main controversies in scientific research on posttraumatic growth and by extension the value of good science and the context in which it is understood.

- Students will apply their course knowledge to their experience responding to adversity in their own lives.

Skill Development:

- Completing a reflective “diary” weekly throughout the semester where they reflect on their well-being across the week, challenging events that they experienced, whether they perceived a “silver lining” in those events
- Engaging with primary research evidence as part of their course reading
- Writing papers analyzing research findings and identifying methodological strengths and limitations in existing research
- Create a mock “TED-talk” in which they summarize and discuss primary research on PTG in an accessible manner
- Develop a research proposal for examining PTG using a methodologically sophisticated design.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Weekly Diary: Students will complete a weekly “diary” throughout the semester where they reflect on their well-being across the week, challenging events that they experienced, whether they perceived a “silver lining” in those events. Students will write a final paper analyzing stories of redemption in their own personal experience. (10% of grade)

Short Essays: You will complete a set of three short essays. First, you will write a short paper synthesizing the major scholarly approaches to the study of redemption in psychology, philosophy and religion (750 words). Second, you will write an essay applying research on post-traumatic growth and resilience to a specific real-world example: such as surviving civil war, poverty or serious illness (750 words each). Third, you will write a paper (750 words) analyzing stories of redemption that have arisen in your weekly diary.

All essays are due to me at the beginning of class on the scheduled date. The purpose of a late policy is to communicate to students that meeting a deadline is important. You must complete and turn in work by the beginning of class on the date the essay is due. I will not accept essays emailed to me. If you are going to be absent when an essay is due, be sure to give it to a classmate or friend, so I have it at the beginning of class. (30% of grade)

No late essays will be accepted. No exceptions.

TED Talk: You will create your very own TED Talk (8-12 minutes), with the goal of contrasting, comparing, understanding and articulating the challenges of scientifically studying post-traumatic growth. You may edit the talk any way you like. The TED Talk presentation should be on a topic of your choice and related to the course, but it should be your very own. Unlike most TED Talks ☺, it should be clear that your talk is based on existing logical, systemic, semantic, or

empirical knowledge and/or evidence. The goal here is to provide a compelling overview of research related to post-traumatic growth to a general audience. (15% of grade)

Final paper: A 7-8 page final paper is due at the final class meeting. Select a theoretical topic related to post-traumatic growth of particular interest to you and form a clear research question that is not entirely answered by the existing literature. Your paper should be structured as a brief proposal, including a theoretically-drawn set of hypotheses and a detailed description of methods and procedures. Your proposed study must include a specific research design, be double-spaced, formatted using APA-style, and include an Abstract, Title-Page and References. The paper must include at least seven references of published articles, books, or chapters (no internet articles). By the end of the second week of class, you are required to submit to me three possible titles of your paper (e.g., “Perceived Growth as a Predictor of Well-Being among individuals recovered from COVID-19”). I will then decide which paper I want to read. Make sure that all three titles reflect three different topics. Think specific for this paper. (20% of grade)

Final Quiz: There are several conceptual, factual, and applied concepts that will be discussed in the assigned readings and during class time. I’ll need to know that you understand these concepts and can apply them. The format of the quiz will be short-answer essay. (15% of grade)

Participation: This course is discussion-based so engaged participation is required in every class. Note that you will not get an A in participation just for coming to class. Passively receiving course information, even with perfect attendance, will only get you a C in this category. I am happy to meet with you to develop strategies for engaging more actively with course readings and discussions. Make-up work for participation will be accepted for absences under certain conditions. Participation includes group presentations, active listening, asking questions about reading material, offering ideas and comments in discussion, completing reading assignments, offering constructive peer critiques, and collaborating with peers on group assignments. (10% of grade)

Letter grades will be determined as follows:

<u>Letter Grade</u>	<u>Points</u>
A	92.5-100
A-	89.5-92.49
B+	86.5-89.49
B	82.5-86.49
B-	79.5-82.49
C+	76.5-79.49
C	72.5-76.49
C-	69.5-72.49
D+	66.5-69.49

D	62.5-66.49
D-	59.5-62.49
F	<59.49

NOTE: Your contributions to class discussion will be noted when final grades are calculated; students who are very close to the cut-off score for the next highest letter will be bumped up to that letter grade. For example, if a student's final score for the course is 89.45 (an "B+"), it will be rounded up to an A- if the student participated a great deal in class discussions.

CLASS POLICIES

ATTENDANCE POLICIES

Class attendance is mandatory. You must be in class in order to receive points for assignments or activities. Most of the lectures include information that may not be provided in your text. If absent, (excused or unexcused) it is the student's responsibility to get notes and assignments from classmates and/or meet with me to answer any questions. **Please do not email me and ask if you missed anything- if you miss a class, of course you missed material and announcements.**

Note that you are allowed THREE unexcused absences before it has an impact on your final grade. Each further absence will result in a reduction of your final letter grade by a 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., after three unexcused absences, a final letter grade of a B+ will be reduced to a B). If excessive absences occur, (more than 4 absences) the Office of Academic Advising at WFU will be notified. It's a good idea to make an appointment to see me before such measures are needed.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

All assignments are due to the professor at the beginning of class on the scheduled date. The purpose of a late policy is to communicate to students that meeting a deadline is important. You must complete and turn in work by the beginning of class on the date the assignment is due. I will not accept assignments emailed to me. If you are going to be absent when an assignment is due, be sure to give it to a classmate or friend, so I have it at the beginning of class.

No late assignments will be accepted- none. No exceptions.

REVIEWING ASSIGNMENTS

All assignments will be graded and returned within one week of the test date. After the assignments have been graded, you may request an online appointment with me to personally review your exam. Students who believe that they deserve more points for any item or who take issue with a specific item will need to provide their rationale **in writing**. I will not engage in oral debate about your grades. Students unsatisfied with their performance in class are strongly encouraged to meet with me to discuss study habits exam as soon as possible.

SEEKING EXTRA HELP

I encourage all students to come see me if they need any extra help. However, in order to benefit, I require that you come in with specific questions. Identifying where you need help is part of the learning process. In addition, I ask that you do not email me assignments and ask me if it's "right". In order for me to help you, I need to know what you need help with.

CLASS COURTESY

It's important to have a classroom in which individuals respect the professor and the other students. Arrive on time and stay for the entire class. Turn off cell phones (don't just put it on vibrate) and **do not** text message during class.

Also, laptop computers are not to be used during class time. If you bring them into class, they should remain closed. **You may think you can multi-task in class. I thought the same thing when I was in college (and sometimes think that even now). You can't. Data supports this.**

E-MAIL AND CANVAS

Students are responsible for information posted on Canvas and sent to their email accounts.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

If a student has a documented disability (or disabilities) that requires special accommodation(s), the student needs to provide acceptable documentation of that disability (or disabilities) to the Learning Assistance Center (758-5929) within the first week of the semester.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY EXPECTATIONS

Students are expected to follow Wake Forest University's Honor Code, as outlined in your student handbook. All violations will be reported to the Ethics Board.

TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE

Date	Topic	Reading
Monday, Aug. 24 th	Introduction: Why This Class?	No reading
Wednesday, Aug. 26 th	"What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger" As a Modern Mantra	Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. <i>Psychological inquiry</i> , 15(1), 1-18
Friday, Aug. 28 th	LAST DAY TO ADD	
Monday, Aug. 31 st	Philosophical Discussions of the Value of Adversity	Kidd, I. J. (2018). Adversity, wisdom, and exemplarism. <i>Journal of Value Inquiry</i> , 52(4), 379-393.

Wednesday, Sept. 2 nd	Philosophical Discussions of the Value of Adversity	Brady, M. S. (2019). Why suffering is essential to wisdom. <i>Journal of Value Inquiry</i> , 53(3), 467-469.
Monday, Sept. 7 ^h	Religious Perspectives on the Value of Adversity	Kidd, I. J., Kynes, W., Blackie, L. E., & McLean, K. C. (2019). Narratives of Adversity and Wisdom in Ancient Ethical and Spiritual Texts. <i>Journal of Value Inquiry</i> , 53(3), 459-461.
Wednesday, Sept. 9 th	Religious Perspectives on the Value of Adversity	McRae, E. (2018). Suffering and the six perfections: Using adversity to attain wisdom in Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. <i>Journal of Value Inquiry</i> , 52(4), 395-410.
Wednesday, Sept. 9 th	LAST DAY TO DROP	
Monday, Sept. 14 th	Narratives of Suffering and Redemption: Based in Reality?	Pals, J. L. (2006). Narrative identity processing of difficult life experiences: Pathways of personality development and positive self-transformation in adulthood. <i>Journal of Personality</i> , 74(4), 1079-1110.
Wednesday, Sept. 16 th	Narratives of Suffering and Redemption: Based in Reality?	Lehman, D. R., Davis, C. G., DeLongis, A., Wortman, C. B., Bluck, S., Mandel, D. R., & Ellard, J. H. (1993). Positive and negative life changes following bereavement and their relations to adjustment. <i>Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology</i> , 12(1), 90-112.
Monday, Sept. 21 st	Post-Traumatic Growth: Can We Trust the Research?	Frazier, P., Tennen, H., Gavian, M., Park, C., Tomich, P., & Tashiro, T. (2009). Does self-reported posttraumatic growth reflect genuine positive change? <i>Psychological Science</i> , 20(7), 912-919. Engelhard, I. M., Lommen, M. J., & Sijbrandij, M. (2015). Changing for better or worse? Posttraumatic growth reported by soldiers deployed to Iraq. <i>Clinical Psychological Science</i> , 3(5), 789-796.

Wednesday, Sept. 23 rd	Post-Traumatic Growth: Can We Trust the Research?	Jayawickreme, E., & Blackie, L.E.R. (2014). Post-traumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Evidence, Controversies and Future Directions. <i>European Journal of Personality, 28</i> , 312-331. http://doi.org/10.1002/per.1963
Monday, Sep. 28 th	The “Real Benefits” of Adversity	Seery, M. D., Leo, R. J., Lupien, S. P., Kondrak, C. L., & Almonte, J. L. (2013). An upside to adversity?: Moderate cumulative lifetime adversity is associated with resilient responses in the face of controlled stressors. <i>Psychological Science, 24</i> , 1181–1189. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612469210
Wednesday, Sep. 30 th	The “Real Benefits” of Adversity	Vollhardt, J. R., & Staub, E. (2011). Inclusive altruism born of suffering: The relationship between adversity and prosocial attitudes and behavior toward disadvantaged outgroups. <i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 81</i> , 307.
Monday, Oct. 5 th	Can We Intervene to Promote Growth in the Wake of Adversity?	Roepke, A. M. (2015). Psychosocial interventions and posttraumatic growth: A meta-analysis. <i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 83</i> (1), 129-142.
Wednesday, Oct. 7 th	Can We Intervene to Promote Growth in the Wake of Adversity?	Roepke, A. M., Tsukayama, E., Forgeard, M., Blackie, L., & Jayawickreme, E. (2018). Randomized controlled trial of SecondStory, an intervention targeting posttraumatic growth, with bereaved adults. <i>Journal of consulting and clinical psychology, 86</i> (6), 518-532.
Monday, Oct. 12 th	Wrapping Up	No reading