Social Issues: Health

The Silver Lining in Life’s Adversities

Many adults, in recounting a difficult time in their lives, say that ultimately it made them stronger—an outcome confirmed by research. As long as serious adversity is not frequent and overwhelming, it can lead to remarkable personal benefits.

In a study carried out in France, researchers followed a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, ranging in age from 18 to 101, for four years (Seery, Holman & Silver, 2010). To assess lifetime exposure to adversity, participants were given a list of 37 negative life events and asked to indicate which ones they had experienced, how often, and the age at which each had occurred. The list focused on serious stressors—for example, violent assault, death of a loved one, severe financial difficulties, divorce, and major disasters such as fire, flood, or earthquake.

A year later, the researchers returned for a measure of recent exposure to adversity, asking participants to indicate how many negative life events they had experienced in the previous six months. Finally, once each year, participants’ mental health and well-being were assessed.

Findings revealed that adults with a history of modest lifetime adversity exposure, compared to no adversity or high adversity, reported more favorable adjustment—less overall psychological distress, less functional impairment (compromised work and social activities due to poor physical and mental health), fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms, and greater life satisfaction (see Figure 15.5). Furthermore, people with modest lifetime adversity were less negatively affected by exposure to recent adversity. These outcomes remained after controlling for diverse factors that might influence experiences of adversity, including age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, SES, and physical health.

Experiencing modest levels of lifetime adversity seems to foster a sense of mastery, generating in people the hardness, or toughness, needed to overcome future stressors (Mineka & Zinbarg, 2006). Adults with no history of adversity are deprived of vital opportunities for learning to manage life stressors, so they respond less optimally when faced with them. And high levels of lifetime adversity overtax people’s coping skills, engulfing them with feelings of hopelessness and loss of control and interfering substantially with mental health and well-being.

In sum, having to grapple with occasional adverse life events is a vital source of resilience. It fortifies people with the personal attributes they need to surmount life stressors they are almost certain to encounter in the future.

Gender and Aging: A Double Standard

Negative stereotypes of aging, which lead many middle-aged adults to fear physical changes, are more likely to be applied to women than to men, yielding a double standard (Antonucci, Blieszner, & Denmark, 2010). Though many women in midlife say they have “hit their stride”—feel assertive, confident, versatile, and capable of resolving life’s problems—people often rate them as less attractive and as having more negative personality characteristics than middle-aged men (Denmark & Klara, 2007; Kite et al., 2005; Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012).

The ideal of a sexually attractive woman—smooth skin, good muscle tone, lustrous hair—is the heart of the double standard of aging. The end of a woman’s capacity to bear children contributes to negative judgments of physical appearance, especially by men (Marcus-Newhall, Thompson, & Thomas, 2001). Societal forces exaggerate this view. For example, middle-aged adults in media ads are usually male executives, fathers, and grandfathers—handsome images of competence and security. And the much larger array of cosmetic products and medical treatments offered to women to hide signs of aging may induce many to feel ashamed of their age and appearance (Chrisler, Barney, & Palatino, 2016).