

Good Will Come

Exploring The Good That Can Emerge From Hardship

By any yardstick, 2020 has been a tough year for many people around the world. COVID-19 has ushered in a variety of restrictions, dangers, and hardship. It has resulted in a great deal of suffering.

Out of hardship, however, can emerge new opportunities, new growth, and other outcomes we might call “good”.

In this resource, we explore the concept of good emerging from hardship, including the kind of growth that can emerge and things we can do to increase the likelihood that good will, indeed, come in the wake of hardship.

“Good” things that can emerge from hardship

We probably all believe on some level that good can emerge from hardship, but what are some of those potential good outcomes?

- ✓ Deeper, closer relationships
- ✓ Greater insight into, respect for, and appreciation of other people
- ✓ New identities, relationships, and affiliations
- ✓ Broader perspective and better understanding of the experiences/challenges faced by others
- ✓ More empathy
- ✓ More gratitude
- ✓ Greater appreciation for the present and hope for the future
- ✓ More patience
- ✓ Greater tolerance for uncertainty and pain
- ✓ Enhanced ability to cope with lower-level life stressors and hassles
- ✓ Being a role model or inspiration for others

How does it work?

How does this process of hardship and suffering yield “good”? Is it mysterious and random or are there understandable processes at work?

It is not all random and mysterious, although occasionally it can feel that way. For example, you might get fired from a job you love, and after 6 months of unemployment meet the person you’ll end up marrying on your first day at your new job.

More often, however, the good things that can emerge in the wake of significant hardship feel hard-won and more forged than found. When good things emerge from events such as serious illness, accidents, relationship breakdown, mental health difficulties, extreme parenting challenges... that good is usually at least partially the result of *how* we engage with those challenges.

If that is the case, how does that process work? This is a very complicated question—one that a lot of researchers, mental health professionals, and religious/spiritual leaders have spent a lot of time exploring. But here is one way we can think about it.

The very things we point to as good outcomes following hardships—things we want to see in our lives—often function as our pathways towards those outcomes... or away from them.

Let's look at relationships

Take relationships as an example. A number of the possible good outcomes we listed earlier are related to relationships. Suffering and struggle can bond people together and lead to richer, deeper, closer, better, relationships.

During times of hardship and struggle...

Do we

- Share our experiences and feelings with others?
- Accept assistance and comfort from others?
- Learn from other people's experiences, explore new parts of our identity, and engage in new communities?
- Periodically focus on others (e.g., express appreciation or acknowledge what they are experiencing?)

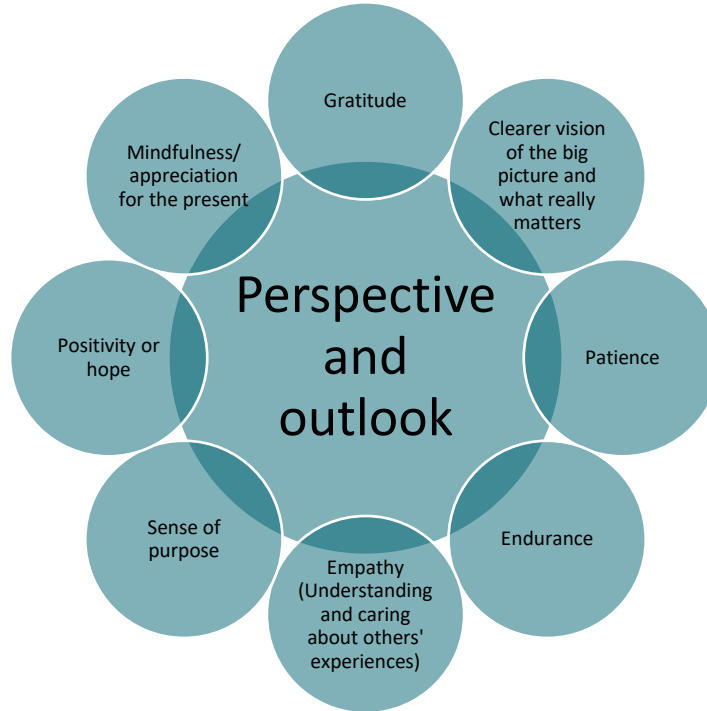
Or do we

- Withdraw from others, shut them out, turn inwards, and take our frustration, grief, fear and anger on them?

If we share our experiences with others, etc., those relationships will likely deepen and strengthen over time. Certain types of hardships (e.g., chronic illness or having a child with a disability) can also introduce us to entirely new communities built around this new facet of our identity. This can gift us new and valuable relationships.

Let's look at perspective

There are other clusters of good outcomes that can emerge from hardship that have to do with our perspective and outlook on life. Take a look at the following diagram.



Most of us want more of these things in our lives, and (just as with relationships), many of these things we want as good outcomes can themselves function as disciplines, as practices, as *paths* leading towards the sort of seasoned perspective and mature outlook that we all want. Here is a look at how that can work in a couple of areas.

Practicing gratitude: Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what we receive and the goodness in our lives, whether tangible or intangible. In the process, we usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside ourselves. As a result, gratitude also helps us connect to something larger than ourselves as individuals — whether to other people, nature, or a higher power. In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.

Paying attention to the positives: Most of us are much better at naming and focusing on the negatives or threat rather than the positives. We can learn how to notice and focus on positive things by, for example, intentionally finding, naming, and celebrating silver linings in storm clouds. Developing this skill helps us feel positive emotions and diminish the space we are giving to negative emotions like sadness and grief. Research has even shown that positive thinking and optimism leads to stronger immune responses. This creates a positive upward spiral: experiencing positive emotions often leads to experiencing more positive emotions, forming new connections, and learning new things.

Listening to and really seeking to understand other people's stories or similar experiences can not only help (in best case scenarios) provide hope and fresh perspectives, but also build our empathy and patience.

Seeking and seeing a sense of meaning and purpose in your pain can help you endure. We can endure greater pain, for longer, if we believe it is purposeful. However, that sense of purpose and meaning is more often something we forge or fashion out of struggle than something that lands in our laps, fully formed.

Again, we can see how growing in these qualities is not generally something that just happens. Our choices, actions, and thoughts over time can help move us toward the sort of good outcomes we all want... or away from them. We can also see how this process can gather momentum over time, with our actions and interactions feeding into each other and creating a positive upwards spiral... or doing the opposite.

But it is more complicated than that!

We have just offered a few thoughts on how good may emerge from hardship. But this topic is complicated. So here are a few thoughts on some of those complications or caveats.

Good outcomes are far from guaranteed. We do not always endure hardship, suffering, and struggle and see good things emerge. Sometimes hardship can yield less patience, less tolerance for stress, and less hope for the future. Often what comes out of hardship feels like a mix of some things we would call "good" and others we might call "bad" (or at least, "uncomfortable" or "undesirable").

There is such a thing as too much or unrealistic positive thinking. We can, for example, move very quickly to focusing on silver linings, without acknowledging our pain and discomfort. It is a valuable skill to be able to acknowledge what you are grateful for AND acknowledge the reality and intensity of your pain without feeling like one has to cancel out the other.

Putting too much pressure on ourselves to "do hardship right" only leads to additional burden and feelings of guilt, shame, and overwhelm. High achievers and performance-oriented people, especially, can struggle with this.

Helping others in this area is difficult. For example, when you are trying to help others it is high-risk to tell them to "think more positively," offer reasons or answers for their pain, or name silver linings for them.

What can we do during hard times to increase good outcomes?

Based on everything outlined so far, what are some things we can do during hard times that will help lead us toward the sort of good outcomes we want to see? Here are a few ideas:

1. **Practice gratitude.** E.g., gratitude journals, prayer. Google “gratitude exercises” for more and you will find lots of them.
2. **Find and name those silver linings.** Do this for *yourself*. Share these thoughts with others (listening to other people authentically share about their own experiences often inspires others.)
3. **Think about previous hardships you have endured and identify the good that has come out of those situations and ways you have grown and changed for the better.** Reviewing ways you have coped and grown in the past reminds you of your strength and resilience and fosters a protective and empowering sense of strength and confidence.
4. **Listen deeply to the stories of others.** Seek out stories shared by others facing similar hardships. This helps us learn new skills and perspectives, fosters empathy, and instills a sense of hope and empowerment and solidarity.
5. **Do things that are fun and that bring you joy and pleasure.** It is still important when we are struggling or in pain to do (safe) things that are *fun*. Spend some time doing things you want to do for the sheer enjoyment of it—things that bring you joy and pleasure.
6. **Do something kind.** During dark days showing kindness or doing something to help others is another proven way to boost our mood, make us feel better, and build relationships. This mood boost and sense of positive achievement can have powerful flow-on effects.
7. **Create something.** Write, paint, cook, clean/organize. Creating something is often a good pathway towards shaping or refining a sense of meaning and purpose.
8. **Find mantras or anchors that work for you.** These sorts of mantras or anchors are truths that help you hang onto helpful perspectives.

Discuss this further

Why not discuss this further with colleagues and friends? Share this resource with them and use our companion resource *Discussion Guide on GOOD WILL COME* to discuss your experiences.