

Prepare for Adversity

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I would like to start by inviting you to take *a deep breath in*. This simple action can do wonders to calm our bodies and minds - often needed when facing difficult times. I will additionally write something that perhaps is not the most traditional way of starting a chapter: feel free to skip this chapter. Sometimes, if you are in the middle of dealing with a significant life challenge, just reading about this topic can be distressing. That is understandable. Listen to yourself and how you are feeling. Maybe you will come back to this chapter later when it feels right for you.

Dear Nietzsche, Could You Clarify Something

For most of us, life is a combination of beautiful highs and challenging lows, with some quite comfortable stages in between. Going to university can be exciting, daunting, intellectually, and socially demanding and many more feelings besides. It is likely that during your time at university, you will face various types of hardships as well. "Prepare for adversity" is a funny title to have for a book chapter as by definition, adversity tends to be impossible to prepare for. Often, that is its nature: unexpected, raising questions about the way you view this life. This makes adversity something that we do not wish to prepare for. However, I hope to show you that you can surround yourself with resources to help you when you encounter these troubling life situations. Perhaps, you may even recognise the positive transformation that can potentially ensue from severe adversity.

There are various perspectives you could take on how to *prepare for adversity*. Many of these are addressed elsewhere in this book (e.g., take care of yourself). This chapter will focus on two psychological concepts that lend themselves to this topic area: *Psychological Resilience* and *Posttraumatic Growth*.

In this chapter psychological resilience is defined as a dynamic process *before, during* and *after* adversity leading to a positive adaptation (Chmitorz et al., 2018; IJntema et al., 2019). This means that resilience can be at times, the ability to stand strong in the face of adversity or the ability to recover relatively quickly with minor impairment, and often in some way strengthened and more resourceful. Most importantly, resilience entails wisdom to know when to stand strong, and when to accept that we have been hurt and need to recover.

Every so often, reality comes even closer, and we are challenged to contemplate life and the way we view it on a fundamental level. These events, that often ‘shatter our assumptions’ about ourselves and the world can be extremely difficult and even traumatising (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Even these starkly confronting experiences sometimes hold space for transformative growth. This phenomenon, most often referred to as Posttraumatic Growth, is seen as both a process and an outcome. Posttraumatic growth is defined as positive transformative changes resulting from a struggle with a highly challenging life circumstance (Tedeschi et al., 2018). In this chapter, these changes are seen as both action-oriented (Hobfoll et al., 2007) and embodied (Hefferon, 2012; Hefferon et al., 2009; Hefferon & Kampman, 2020). This means that the change will show in the way you think, behave and in your relationship with your body.

The concepts mentioned above are regularly present in our everyday language. Many of us have heard Nietzsche's famous words 'that which does not kill us, makes us stronger'. We might have also heard that 'smooth seas do not make skilful sailors', or well-meaning people suggesting to us that we should have more 'grit'. There are also times in our lives when we might feel that we have reached our maximum levels of strength, and we have no desire to become stronger--"No more challenges please – the strength and conditioning have been quite enough at this point thank you. If the sea requires such a skilled sailor, perhaps it is better to stay on land". In other words, in times of adversity, some of these popular sayings might be difficult to take on board and perhaps even hurtful amidst a traumatic experience. Therefore, I want to emphasise that the chapter you are reading is only an invitation to explore these concepts—it is not meant as a prescription which everyone should follow. I want to share these ideas, as many people have found hope and strength from them or even recognised something that they are already experiencing and exhibiting in their lives but never had the words for.

Learning Goals for This Journey

- Define adversity and acknowledge how common it is.
- Define resilience and posttraumatic growth as well as awaken the wisdom to know when to lean into each one.
- Help you to recognise and foster resilience and posttraumatic growth in your life through invitation to several activities.

I Come in Peace and Only Armed with Research

Defining Adversity

This chapter particularly addresses the severe challenges of life, times that can even be traumatising. There is no clear consensus among researchers when it comes to defining adversity in relation to psychological resilience. Rather, adversity can entail various things, from smaller everyday stressors to significant adverse events (Bryan et al., 2017; IJntema et al., 2019). What appears to be more agreed upon is that our subjective understanding of adversity is an essential element of this definition. Meaning that, what is highly stressful for one individual might not be as distressing for someone else. Your appraisal (evaluation) of the situation matters: what is happening here? Can I handle this? Do I have resources to handle this? (Please also see section 'stress and coping' in Chapter 6 - look after yourself). Your previous experiences also matter. The first time you fail an assignment; the first failed romantic relationship, or the first time being fired from a job can all be devastating because we have not experienced them before. Thus, we might appraise the magnitude of the event strongly, our resources to deal with it as lacking and the implications far reaching.

The adversity or trauma in posttraumatic growth is defined as 'a highly stressful and challenging life-altering event' (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p.4). These events have 'a seismic impact on individuals' worldview and functioning' (Tedeschi et al., 1998, p.2). A metaphor of an earthquake is sometimes used to describe how the trauma shakes the foundations of the individual's worldview (Tedeschi et al., 2018). For posttraumatic growth, adversity entails both objective and subjective aspects. This means that most people would find the situation highly stressful, and your personal reaction entails severe distress and helplessness. I often refer to trauma as a thief – it steals some aspects of your life (e.g., a job, a part of your identity, a sense of security, hobbies, or friends). Even if the traumatic event(s) were the same or similar between two people, what it takes from someone is always personal. We

should consciously respect everyone's individual journey and be kind towards ourselves if we appear to be struggling where someone else is not. It is worth mentioning at this point that the potential growth journey following these struggles will be unique as well.

Resilience – to Bend or Not to Bend?

There is a lovely tree metaphor for different ways of defining psychological resilience (Lepore & Revenson, 2006). Some trees bend amidst the storm, recovering quite quickly back to their original position. This type of resilience is often referred to in the literature as *recovery resilience* (Lepore & Revenson, 2006)--the ability to rebound or bounce back. Individuals exhibiting recovery resilience will have minor or short-term disruptions to their wellbeing and will quite swiftly return to their previous level of functioning (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). It is important to note that the recovery resilience does not suggest that the individual has not been affected by what has happened (Zautra et al., 2010). You might have had a hard, unpleasant time which you do not wish to experience again where you are not able to do things as before. This is only temporary though and you are feeling yourself quite quickly after the situation has passed.

There are also trees which stand strong in the storm (Lepore & Revenson, 2006). This type of resilience is known as “robust resilience” or standing strong in the face of adversity.

Individuals exhibiting *resistance resilience* will maintain their previous level of wellbeing and performance despite the hurdles (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Zautra, Hall, and Murray (2010) describe this type of resilience as sustainability – the capacity to keep going. You might be exhibiting resistance resilience when facing hardships and still being able to engage with life, as usual, enjoying what you are doing. You are attending to the difficulties and perceive that you have resources and ability to deal with them.

Finally, trees might bend and accommodate the storm; however, instead of returning to the previous shape, they somehow adjust. The *reconfiguration resilience* can be seen in individuals as an ability to rebound from adversity stronger and more resourceful (Walsh, 1998). When defining resilience this way, it is akin to posttraumatic growth, enabling 'recovery and positive growth' (Walsh, 2012, p.399).

Sometimes standing strong is an option and can help you to get through difficult times. Standing too strong for too long can be exhausting. Often the smartest thing is to admit that we need help. A break, rest, and recovery are only possible if we acknowledge that we need them. Resilience is the wisdom to know the difference and act accordingly.

Posttraumatic Growth – A Ray of Hope

The term Posttraumatic Growth was first used in the mid 1990's by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1995). This phenomenon stemmed from clinical practice worldwide, where practitioners witnessed that even after most harrowing experiences, people often expressed benefits that they perceived gaining from the journey (cf. Joseph, 2012). These positive changes were truly transformative for the individuals who had 'developed beyond their previous level of adaptation, psychological functioning or life awareness', meaning they had grown (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1998, p.3). Currently, these transformations are seen as positive cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and even biological changes that an individual experiences in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Tedeschi, et al., 2018). It can be witnessed in how people view themselves, among their relationships and in their philosophy of life. It is essential to understand that it is not the event itself where the growth stems. Rather, posttraumatic growth evolves as the individual is working hard to come to terms with the aftermath of their trauma. This can take years as the person purposefully acknowledges and accepts the losses, carving space for new insights. Posttraumatic growth is not about reactive

and quick changes immediately after traumatic events. The 'gradual' changes are part of a lengthy and unfolding journey (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Tennen & Affleck, 1998). The process of cultivating growth demands new ways of 'thinking, feeling and behaving' because what has happened does not allow the individual to 'return to baseline functioning' (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 5). This means individuals reporting posttraumatic growth surpass the previous levels of functioning in some ways.

People reporting posttraumatic growth often have common themes in their growth outcomes (cf. Hefferon & Kampman, 2020; Kampman et al., 2015; Tedeschi et al., 2018).

1. Appreciation of life
2. Personal strength
3. Relating to others
4. New possibilities
5. Spiritual and existential change
6. A new awareness of the body

Individuals that have gone through significant adversity often talk about *appreciating their life more*. People might talk about enjoying the little things in life more, which they took for granted before. Because adversity often questions us in ways that we could not imagine, we might even have a sense of *personal strength*. People often describe this as 'if I can survive this, I can face anything'. Sometimes we start appreciating the people in our lives more and *relate to others* differently. Individuals talk about knowing who their true friends are and who truly matters in their lives, valuing these relationships and placing more effort into maintaining them. *New possibilities* might arise and be recognised after the experience, such as opportunities for new careers (e.g., public speaking) or engaging with new hobbies that are meaningful (e.g., sports)(Kampman & Hefferon, 2020). Going through trauma can often remind us how small we are in this vast world. People reporting growth on the other hand talk about being part of something larger than themselves--humanity (Kampman et al., 2015).

Therefore, *spiritual and existential change* are common outcomes of dealing with adversity. Finally, a very physical trauma, such as severe illness or injury, might awaken a more embodied experience of posttraumatic growth where we have *a new awareness of the body*. Individuals reporting corporeal posttraumatic growth discuss acknowledging and appreciating their physical being more and being kind towards their bodies (Hefferon, 2012; Hefferon & Kampman, 2020; Kampman et al., 2015; Kampman & Hefferon, 2020). Several studies have shown clear similarities in individuals' stories (Tedeschi et al., 2018), and the growth experiences circle around the themes mentioned above. Still, the growth following adversity is always as unique as you are.

Stephen Joseph (2012) describes growth after trauma with an illuminating vase metaphor. Joseph suggests that there are times in our life where a treasured vase gets knocked down. The vase breaks on impact; however, you can still put it together as it was. You will probably see the cracks, but it is still the same vase. It might be even stronger, depending on how it was attended to. Sometimes in life the impact is so strong that the vase breaks into smithereens. It is no longer possible to build the same vase again. With time though, you could build something uniquely beautiful: a mosaic.

Summary of Theory

- Most of us will face adversity during our lifetimes, thus it is normal to struggle at times.
- Adversity is always personal. What is highly stressful for one person might not be that for someone else.

- Psychological resilience is a dynamic process involving an interplay between various factors: adversity, context, individuals' reactions (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and behavioural), individual and environmental resources.
- As a dynamic process, psychological resilience can be facilitated through learning and activity.
- Posttraumatic growth is both a process and a potential outcome of the struggle with adversity.
- Individuals might experience growth in one area of life (e.g., personal strength) and not in others.
- It is completely normal not to experience posttraumatic growth.

The following section will offer some ideas on attending to 'our unique vases'. The section is built to offer something to you whether you are in the process of fixing the vase or piecing together a mosaic. I do want to remind you that each activity is an invitation - you do not need to engage with them if it feels too much for the time being.

Putting All This into Action

ACTIVITY 1 - Stocking up!

As with any skills training, it is better to practice it before you need to master it. Because of this, my first recommendation is to read and engage with the other chapters in this book.

Some of the most known facilitators of psychological resilience and posttraumatic growth are covered in each chapter of this book. Start by *looking after yourself and identifying the values and strengths* that guide you in this life. Engaging in these activities can increase your resources and focus on what brings you vitality, meaning and positive emotions. *Having more*

fun is a serious matter that can connect you to your meaning. Spending time with your friends, doing something fun, can additionally reduce your levels of stress whilst you experience more positive emotions. In fact, one of the most common resilience and posttraumatic growth facilitator is meaningful relationships (Long & Bonanno, 2018; Tedeschi et al., 2018). You can additionally increase your personal resources by *focusing on what is possible* and *learning through doing*, as both perspective-taking and learning from past challenges are at the centre of resilience. *Living mindfully* is an ideal approach to ground yourself through into the present time. In the midst of adversity, *hope* can be an essential forward-moving force (Yıldırım & Arslan, 2020). Finally, individuals who report posttraumatic growth often talk about moving from self-centred perspectives to *caring about the world* and other people in it (Kampman et al., 2015).

Due to this book already being a roadmap to resilience and a potential facilitator of posttraumatic growth, I will focus on some of my personal favourites in this chapter. We will be spending time in nature and I will also help you to think with kindness. Additionally, we will aim to capture the learning and recognise the growth in your life.

Facilitating resilience

When it comes to psychological resilience, it is essential to know what type of resilience we are facilitating (IJntema et al., 2019). The following suggestions are divided into activities according to the type of psychological resilience. It is also important to consider where you are in your resilience journey: before, during or after (IJntema et al., 2019). The other chapters in this book are fantastic resources to familiarize yourself with, *before* you find yourself in the middle of adversity. The following section will therefore focus on the periods *during* and *after* the adversity. Two interventions are proved to be most effective in

facilitating resilience: mindfulness and cognitive-behavioural techniques (Joyce et al., 2018).

The following activities will therefore lean on these two concepts.

ACTIVITY 2 – Grounding Yourself with the Help of Nature

One of the key tenets of mindfulness is grounding yourself into the present moment (Hart et al., 2013; Ivtzan & Lomas, 2016 - Please also see chapter 'live mindfully' in this book). Two things are likely to happen when dealing with hardship. Our mind is drawn towards the past, and we tend to become sad because of what has happened. Equally, our mind might drift into the future, and we can become anxious about what might happen because of the situation we are in. Luckily, nature has a wonderful ability to offer 'soft fascination' for us— it can hold our attention without demanding it (Duvall & Sullivan, 2016; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The following exercise can be beneficial for facilitating resilience (as well as carve space for posttraumatic growth) as it helps you ground yourself into the present moment.

Helping You to Bend With the Challenges - Recovery Resilience

This activity is based on a tested positive psychology intervention by Hamann and Ivtzan, (2016) and research around Attention Restoration Theory (ART; Basu et al., 2019; Duvall & Sullivan, 2016; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). ART suggests that there are four ways nature can restore our attention (Duvall & Sullivan, 2016, p. 38-39): by offering a chance for *Being away* from mentally tiring activities and environment; surrounding ourselves with something that *Fascinates* us without effort; offering a vast space, where we will have a feeling of *Extent*; and through *Compatibility* between the activity and what you are trying to take a break from.

- Spend at least 15 minutes a day in any type of outdoor or natural environment, if interested, try walking, running, or cycling to move your body as well.
- Please turn off your electronic devices.

When choosing this place, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Being away**
 - *Where can you be away from mentally tiring activities?*
 - *What could potentially distract you there? Can you leave these items behind?*

- **Fascination with**
 - *What for you is effortlessly fascinating?*
 - *Can you find a place which offers you this soft fascination? What holds your attention but does not demand it?*

- **Extent of**
 - *Where could you feel a sense of extent, feeling of space?*
 - *Where can your mind freely drift into its surroundings?*

- **Compatibility with**
 - *How is your break compatible with what you are trying to have a rest from?*
 - *How could you make the restorative environment significantly differ from the mentally tiring environment?*

If your mind still wanders – which is what minds often do– try the following:

1. Focus on one thing that you can see; what are its colours, shape, depth...?
2. Move on to finding one thing that you can hear; is it soft, sharp, does it have rhythm...?
3. Finally, focus on your body and notice what you feel in your body; is it tension, softness, cold, warm...?

These activities aim to give you a break from rumination and the environment which might be distressing you. These activities can calm your nervous system, allowing you to feel a bit relaxed and more centred, often enabling us to see more clearly and discover new perspectives and resources.

ACTIVITY 3 – Your Emotions are Certainly Real but That Does not Make Them True

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) pioneered by Dr. Aaron Beck in the 1960s is centred around the idea that our thinking, feeling, and behaving all impact each other. More specifically, how we are thinking about a situation, influences how we are feeling about it, which has implications on the actions we choose to take. As you remember, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects are at the centre of the dynamic process of resilience, making CBT techniques an ideal tool to increase our potential for adapting to challenge in resilient ways.

Helping You to Stand Strong – Resistance Resilience

The following exercise aims to engage with your thinking patterns and see if you might be engaging in some unhelpful ways of thinking. Most of us have some thinking errors which we are not aware of. When our reflection is not accurate, it can lead to inaccurate feelings about the situation, leading us to act accordingly. Below I have listed 12 commonly recognised thinking errors. See if some of them resonate with you. If so, acknowledge that this is a thinking error. Also, think what other interpretation could exist? I have crafted space for you to write on the pages of this book.

Thinking errors	What is happening?	How does this thinking error show?	Can you think of a different, more adaptive interpretation?
Catastrophising	We think that one thing leads to another with worst possible outcome which we are not	This one mistake will mean that <i>I will get fired</i>	Everyone makes mistakes. I have many qualities that make me good at my job, I just need to practice this one aspect more

	going to be able to cope with		
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Catastrophising</i>			
All-or-nothing thinking	“Either or thinking”, involves exaggeration of outcomes: fail or success, good or bad.	I failed this assignment so <i>I will not graduate</i>	I have passed all the other assignments so the likelihood is that I will graduate. Perhaps I did not work hard enough <i>this time</i> , next time I will start earlier
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of All-or-nothing thinking</i>			
Fortune telling	Thinking that we know the future and outcome of the event(s)	<i>I know I will fail</i> this exam	I do not <i>know</i> that I am going to fail. What <i>I do know</i> is that I can take the test and find out
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Fortune telling</i>			
Mindreading	Believing that we know what others are thinking and assuming the worst	Everyone <i>will think</i> that I am not very smart because of this presentation	I cannot possibly <i>know</i> what people think. They could just as well think the opposite. I could ask feedback on this presentation.
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Mindreading</i>			
Overgeneralization	Using words such as everyone, everything, always, never – suggesting that the context of the situation does not matter	Bad things <i>always</i> happen to me	A lot has happened lately, and it makes me <i>feel</i> that only bad things happen. If I take a bigger perspective to things, a lot of good has happened too.
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Overgeneralization</i>			
Labelling	Giving yourself negative labels, talking to yourself negatively	I failed my essay, so <i>I am</i> a failure	This time I did not succeed in my goals
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Labelling</i>			
Demands	Expecting how you should always feel	<i>I should</i> already feel better, <i>I should</i> not	I am a human being. I can be sad or tired

	and behave, causing anxiety and disappointment	make mistakes, <i>I must</i> control my feelings	sometimes, people who do not make mistakes probably do not do anything at all
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Demands</i>			
Tunnel vision	Focusing on one aspect and ignoring all the other information	This <i>one</i> person in the audience appears really bored of my presentation, <i>I must be doing a bad job here</i>	Perhaps this one person is tired or has something else on his mind, the rest of my classmates appear to be enjoying this.
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Tunnel vision</i>			
Minimizing versus maximizing	Includes minimising the positive significant events (e.g., achievements) or maximising the significance of negative events (e.g., failed essay)	I am on <i>my third year of university</i> which is not anything special - I failed one course, on my third year, which defines my whole degree	I should celebrate my achievement so far! Let me look at that grade registration list again and realise how far I have travelled.
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Minimizing versus maximizing</i>			
Personalizing	Thinking that you are the sole reason behind negative events. You might feel guilt and shame.	<i>It is my fault</i> that nobody is having fun at this party	Maybe not the best jamming session but there are 20 other humans here equally responsible for the atmosphere
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Personalizing</i>			
Externalization	When you are not taking responsibility of your role in your situation. Can cause inaction (helplessness) and feeling that you are not in control.	<i>The university is causing</i> me to fail my assignments	Maybe I could reach out more to understand the assignments. Have I used all the resources given to me? Have I allocated enough time to work on my essays?
<i>Write down your personal example and adaptive interpretation of Externalization</i>			

It is powerful to recognise your erroneous thinking patterns so that you can start questioning them. What is the worst thing that can happen due to the situation you are in? If you look back on this, will it matter in 5 years? Particularly take notice if you are using superlatives such as 'always' or 'never' and think if they represent reality. E.g., "I always fail!" Have you indeed failed at everything so far in life? Probably not. Notice the good, acknowledge your successes and develop a more balanced view of your situation. Plan the appropriate action after this evaluation: "I did not fail the previous tasks. What did I do differently then? What can I do differently next time?"

Ps. I recommend listening to this song: What Difference a Day Makes, performed by Dinah Washington and written by Maria Grever and Stanley Adams:

*"What a difference a day made
Twenty-four little hours
Brought the sun and the flowers
Where there used to be rain"*

Facilitating Posttraumatic Growth

Among the researchers and practitioners in the posttraumatic growth area, there is a strong consensus that growth after adversity usually occurs quite organically. It is better to walk with the individual on their journey, rather than impose these ideas on someone. Perhaps notice growth experiences when they are vivid in someone's own thinking and actions (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013) – rather than suggesting that growth is something that ought to happen. The following exercise is an invitation-only – engage with it if you are interested in exploring it. I do want to emphasise that posttraumatic growth is not something you must find or experience. It is completely normal to not connect with this theory or exercise.

ACTIVITY 4 - Capturing Transformative Growth

In this exercise, I am building on the theory of posttraumatic growth. I am also leaning on a meaning in life intervention devised by Steger and colleagues (2014). Here we are aiming to recognise and appreciate posttraumatic growth in our lives.

Choose one of the areas of posttraumatic growth that naturally calls for you: Appreciation of life; Personal strength; Relating to others; New possibilities; Spiritual and Existential change; or New Awareness of the body.

1. Start taking photographs* which reflect e.g., personal strength in your life after your adversity.
2. Collect 8-12 photographs.
3. Collate the pictures together and ask yourself:
 - a. What does this picture represent?
 - b. How does the picture embody personal strength for you?
 - c. If possible, write a little reflective note about each photo you took.

*If you have a visual impairment and are listening to this book as an audiobook, you could try this exercise by choosing a song that reflects one of the posttraumatic growth areas.

Alternatively, select an object from your life that has this kind of tactile representation for you.

This exercise aims to help you notice the growth in your life, you can even use it to write yourself a new story from survivor to thriver (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2012). It is important to note that often the distress and growth also coexist. This is natural. Sadness or grief does not disappear overnight, nor does it need to. Travel with kindness towards all you feel.

Final Words

I want to thank you for taking this journey with me on this chapter. The topic area is challenging as well as powerful with rays of hope within. In this last paragraph, I want to consider a lovely Japanese art tradition called the golden repair (kintsugi or kintsukuroi). If beloved pottery has broken, gold or other valued metals are used to repair the piece. The idea is that when something has suffered damage, this becomes part of its history. Rather than hiding its new features, we should celebrate them. I will finish this chapter with the words of a famous Finnish poet Tommy Taberman and suggest that '*Sometimes the most wholesome of us are made of smithereens*'.

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