

# On Coronavirus Lockdown? Look for Meaning, Not Happiness

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The coronavirus pandemic has not just threatened the physical health of millions but also wreaked havoc on the emotional and mental well-being of people around the world. Feelings of anxiety, helplessness and grief are rising as people face an increasingly uncertain future — and nearly everyone has been touched by loss. A nationally representative poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that nearly half of all Americans — 45 percent — feel that the coronavirus has negatively affected their mental health.

Which raises a question: Is there anything people can do to cope with the emotional fallout of this confusing and challenging time?

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To understand how tragic optimism might serve us during the pandemic, it might help to recall how America responded to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. People reported increased feelings of fear, anxiety and hopelessness. These emotions were more debilitating for some than for others. To learn why, a group of researchers, led by Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, studied the well-being of young adults in the weeks after the attacks. None of the students had lost loved ones on Sept. 11, but like the population at large, they reported feeling distressed. And yet, some of them were less likely to become depressed than others. What set those resilient students apart was their ability to find the good. Unlike the less resilient students, the resilient reported experiencing more positive emotions, like love and gratitude.

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Yet psychologists now know that only a small percentage of people develop the full-blown disorder while, on average, anywhere from one half to two-thirds of trauma survivors exhibit what's known as post-traumatic growth. After a crisis, most people acquire a newfound sense of purpose, develop deeper relationships, have a greater appreciation of life and report other benefits.

It's not the adversity itself that leads to growth. It's how people respond to it. According to the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who coined the term "post-traumatic growth" in the 1990s, the people who grow after a crisis spend a lot of time trying to make sense of what happened and understanding how it changed them. In other words, they search for and find positive meaning.