

# Traumatic Experiences May Make You Tough

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Your parents were right: Hard experiences may indeed make you tough. Psychological scientists have found that, while going through many experiences like assault, hurricanes, and bereavement can be psychologically damaging, small amounts of trauma may help people develop resilience.

“Of course, everybody’s heard the aphorism, ‘Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger,’” says Mark D. Seery of the University at Buffalo. His paper on adversity and resilience appears in the December issue of [\*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#). But in psychology, he says, a lot of ideas that seem like common sense aren’t supported by scientific evidence.

Indeed, a lot of solid psychology research shows that having miserable life experiences is bad for you. Serious events, like the death of a child or parent, a natural disaster, being physically attacked, experiencing sexual abuse, or being forcibly separated from your family, can cause psychological problems. In fact, some research has suggested that the best way to go through life is having nothing ever happen to you. But not only is that unrealistic, it’s not necessarily healthy, Seery says.

In one study, Seery and his colleagues found that people who experienced many traumatic life events were more distressed in general—but they also found that people who had experienced no negative life events had similar problems. The people with the best outcomes were those who had experienced some negative events. Another study found that people with chronic back pain were able to get around better if they had experienced some serious adversity, whereas people with either a lot of adversity or none at all were more impaired.

One possibility for this pattern is that people who have been through difficult experiences have had a chance to develop their ability to cope. “The idea is that negative life experiences can toughen people, making them better able to manage subsequent difficulties,” Seery says. In addition, people who get through bad events may have tested out their social network, learning how to get help when they need it.

This research isn’t telling parents to abuse their kids so they’ll grow up to be well-adjusted adults, Seery says. “Negative events have negative effects,” he says. “I really look at this as being a silver lining. Just because something bad has happened to someone doesn’t mean they’re doomed to be damaged from that point on.”