

They Say Suffering Will Make You Stronger—But It's Not That Simple

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Is suffering good for us? Does it make us better people, kinder and more resilient; does it give meaning to our lives?

It would be nice if it did, particularly since so many of us have been suffering these days. Around three-quarters of a million Americans have died of Covid, and those who loved them often didn't get to say goodbye or hold a proper funeral. Millions have lost their jobs or their businesses, millions have had their life projects put on hold or derailed. There have been those trapped together who hate each other and others who essentially lived in solitary confinement. Even the luckiest experienced boredom, anxiety, and dread.

Many religious traditions see value in such suffering. Among other things, it is said to bring us closer to God. [C.S. Lewis](#) worried that we get too complacent and proud in our happiness; suffering wakes us up: “God whispers to us in our pleasures ... but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.” Some take this to extremes. William Henry Atkinson, the president of the American Dental Association, reportedly [said](#), “I wish there were no such thing as anesthesia! I do not think men should be prevented from passing through what from passing through what God intended them to endure.”

I don't think any modern-day psychologists would go this far, but some believe that great benefits can come from terrible experiences. Everyone has heard of post-traumatic stress; the alternative they advance is post-traumatic *growth*. As Richard [Tedeschi](#), one of the founders of the theory, puts it, after experiencing traumatic events, “People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life.”

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