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Family Edge

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Whatever does not kill us can make us stronger

Carolyn Moynihan | 19 Oct 2010 | (3)

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With the Chilean copper miners who were trapped deep below ground for more than two months providing an ongoing object lesson in coping with adversity, the role of adverse experiences in our lives is of global interest.



A newly published study of 2398 Americans

suggests that, in the long run, whatever does not kill us makes us stronger.

[Psychology professor Mark] Seery, senior author of the study, says previous research indicates that exposure to adverse life events typically predicts negative effects on mental health and well-being, such that more adversity predicts worse outcomes.

But in this study of a national survey panel of 2,398 subjects assessed repeatedly from 2001 to 2004, Seery and co-researchers found those exposed to some adverse events reported better mental health and well-being outcomes than people with a high history of adversity or those with no history of adversity.

In other words, both too little and too much adversity are not good for your mental health. So it would seem just as mistaken to try and protect yourself -- or your children -- from all hardship as it would be to not try and avoid major setbacks -- or to discount the harm they can do.

"Our findings revealed," he says, "that a history of some lifetime adversity -- relative to both no adversity or high adversity -- predicted lower global distress, lower functional impairment, lower PTS symptoms and higher life satisfaction."

The team also found that, across these same longitudinal outcome measures, people with a history of some lifetime adversity appeared less negatively affected by recent adverse events than other individuals.

This is another no-brainer study, really. A bit of adversity builds resilience, like childhood sicknesses can build up immunity -- if my bush medicine theory is correct. Child-rearing experts today - - some at least -- are telling parents to stop over-protecting their kids and let them play in the mud and climb trees, even at the risk of falling and breaking the odd bone. The same principle

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Promoting compulsory sexual

would apply, presumably, to dealing with occasional (not persistent) teasing at school or the risk of failure in some school subject or sport.

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