

# What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger

[What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger](#)

by [Academy of Ideas](#)

originally published August 17, 2024

**The following is a transcript of this video.**

“The warrior’s approach is to say “yes” to life: “yea” to it all...Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging. Negativism to the pain and ferocity of life is negativism to life. We are not there until we can say “yea” to it all.”

*Joseph Campbell, Reflections on the Art of Living*

Just as the wood of a tree is strengthened by the storm, in the life of man adversity is the sculptor of a strong and resilient character. Most people, however, fear adversity, they flee from it and believe that if it becomes too severe they will not be strengthened by it, but broken. In this video, we explore how most people underestimate the degree of adversity they can withstand and overlook the fact that even traumatic experiences can be the catalyst for personal growth.

“Out of life’s school of war—what doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger.”

*Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols*

Bad things happen – this is one of life’s guarantees. Most of the time the hardships that confront us are minor and

manageable. But at certain times adversity strikes that shakes the very foundations of our being. These are the experiences that are so intense or tragic that they are characterized as traumatic. In his book *What Doesn't Kill Us*, the psychologist Stephen Joseph notes that:

“Researchers have estimated that 75 percent of all people experience some form of trauma in life—the loss or suffering of a loved one, the diagnosis of an illness, the pain of divorce or separation, the shock of an accident, assault, or environmental disaster. Around a fifth of all people are likely to experience a potentially traumatic event within a given year. By its very definition, trauma is unexpected, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Believing that life can be lived without encountering adversity is a lost cause.”

*Stephen Joseph, What Doesn't Kill Us*

The word trauma derives from the Greek word meaning “wound” and was first used in the 17th century to refer to a physical wound which pierces the body. In the 20th century Sigmund Freud adopted the word for psychological purposes to refer to painful experiences that puncture the psyche and leave us emotionally wounded. Throughout the 20th century, most psychologists focused on the negative symptoms that accompany traumatic experiences. After all, what good can come from the worst life has to offer? In the 1990s, however, the psychologists Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun noticed that while suffering was inevitable following a traumatic experience, accompanying this suffering some people experienced immense growth in various areas of life – including an increase of personal strength, a greater appreciation of life, richer relationships, an openness to new possibilities, a greater sense of meaning, and a deeper spiritual attitude. This growth which follows trauma they called “posttraumatic growth”, and as Stephen Joseph writes:

“The idea of transformation through trauma goes against the grain of all that is written about the devastating and destructive effects of trauma. Psychological studies have shown that adverse life-events are often the trigger for depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress. What, then, are we to make of the stories of people who have encountered a life-threatening illness, a harrowing natural disaster, even a man-made horror, and then go on to tell of how it was a transformational turning point in their lives? Such stories seem to point to the truth of Nietzsche’s dictum: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.””

*Stephen Joseph, What Doesn’t Kill Us*

History is replete with stories of individuals that validate Nietzsche’s dictum. Take Viktor Frankl. In 1942 the Nazis took Frankl, his wife, brother, and parents to a concentration camp. His mother and brother were murdered. His father died of exhaustion, his wife died of typhus, and Frankl was transferred between 4 concentration camps in 3 years. Instead of letting this tragedy destroy him, Frankl accepted his fate and through his suffering transformed himself into a heroic character and one of the greatest psychologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And as Frankl wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

“When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. ... His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.”

*Viktor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning*

Another example of an individual who embodied Nietzsche’s dictum is Terry Waite. In 1987 Waite traveled to Beirut Lebanon to secure the release of hostages. He was captured and spent 4 years in solitary confinement, where he was repeatedly beaten, chained, and subjected to mock executions.

“I said three things on release: no regret, no self-pity, and no sentimentality.”, explains Waite. “I tried to turn the experience around. Suffering is universal; you attempt to subvert it so that it does not have a destructive, negative effect. You turn it around so that it becomes a creative, positive force.”

*Terry Waite, Quoted in What Doesn't Kill Us*

Some might argue that Frankl and Waite belong to a rare breed of individuals who are capable of transmuting traumatic experiences into personal growth. Research, however, suggests that this capacity is widespread. After surveying the literature, Stephen Joseph notes that up to 70 percent of individuals who experience serious trauma report “*some form of benefit following [the traumatic event].*” What is more, “*Studies have shown that higher levels of posttraumatic stress are often associated with higher levels of growth.*” It appears as if the human psyche has evolved the capacity to not only to endure trauma, but to use the stress that follows to foster growth.

“...posttraumatic stress is the engine of transformation—of a process known as posttraumatic growth...posttraumatic stress is a natural and normal process of adaption to adversity that marks the beginning of a transformative journey...there is nothing positive about trauma...it is in the struggle to deal with what has happened that positive change can arise.”

*Stephen Joseph, What Doesn't Kill Us*

One of the ways posttraumatic growth occurs is through what is called the “existential wakeup call”. When trauma or adversity strikes, we may become aware of how precarious and precious life is, and this can motivate us to make needed changes to our values, beliefs, and priorities. Or as Stephen Joseph writes:

“Not until adversity strikes do many people begin to look deeply within themselves to reappraise what really matters. Adversity can awaken people to new and more meaningful lives...Trauma forces people to confront a crossroads in their lives.”

*Stephen Joseph, What Doesn't Kill Us*

While we have a natural disposition to grow in response to adversity and trauma, a weak mindset can impede this growth. To strengthen our mindset, we can turn to the wisdom of the ancient stoic philosophers. The stoics recognized that adversity is an unavoidable part of human existence, and that we should, therefore, psychologically prepare ourselves for challenging times before they arise.

“What should a philosopher say, then, in the face of each of the hardships of life? ‘It is for this that I’ve been training myself; it is for this that I was practising.’”, stated Epictetus.

*Epictetus, Discourses*

Training for adversity requires that we accept that life is uncertain, and that we will face various misfortunes, both minor and major, throughout life. Most of us do not accept this. Instead, we convince ourselves that the hardships that happen to other people are unlikely to happen to us. “*In experiments in which people are asked to rate their chances of experiencing negative events, they consistently rate their own chances lower than those of others.*”, explains Stephen Joseph. While alleviating our anxiety in the moment, this strategy of sticking our head in the sand leaves us vulnerable. For if we believe we are unlikely to face misfortune, when we do, we will be unprepared and susceptible to greater suffering. Or as the Roman Stoic Seneca noted:

“What is quite unlooked for is more crushing in its effect, and unexpectedness adds to the weight of a disaster. The

fact that it was unforeseen has never failed to intensify a person's grief."

*Seneca, Letters from a Stoic*

For this reason, the Stoics recommended we set aside time to contemplate the various misfortunes that could befall us, and occasionally imagine that a specific misfortune has already occurred. Arthur Schopenhauer, who was influenced by the stoic philosophers, wrote that:

"There is some use in occasionally looking upon terrible misfortunes – such as might happen to us – as though they had actually happened."

*Arthur Schopenhauer, Counsels and Maxims*

As an example, we can imagine that we have suffered a great loss or the death of someone we love. Not only will this practice heighten our appreciation of what we have, ensuring that we do not take it for granted; but if such a loss or death does occur, we will be in the position of the Stoic wise man whose foresight blunts the negative effects of tragedy and minimizes the degree of suffering and grief.

"The wise man gets used to future evils...", writes Seneca. "We sometimes hear the inexperienced say, "I didn't know this was in store for me." The wise man knows that everything is in store for him. Whatever happens, he says, "I knew.""

*Seneca, Epistles*

Or as Seneca continues:

"...by looking ahead to all that may happen as though it were going to happen, he will soften the attacks of all ills, which bring nothing unforeseen to those who are prepared and expectant, but come as a serious blow to those who show no concern and expect only blessings. Sickness befalls a

man, captivity, disaster, destruction by fire: none of these things, however, is unexpected; I knew in what rowdy company Nature had confined me...A great many men on the point of taking to the sea give no thought to storms."

*Seneca, Dialogues and Essays*

Along with preparing for potential adversities ahead of time, to further improve our capacity to endure the worst life offers, we can strive for what Nietzsche called "*the highest state a human can attain...to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence.*" (*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*) Dionysus was a Greek God. In one myth the Titans, former gods whose power had been supplanted, are jealous of Dionysus and so they capture him and tear his body into pieces. Dionysus's father, Zeus, quickly intervenes and brings Dionysus back to life. Hence why Dionysus is an archetypal symbol of resurrection, but more importantly, of psychological rebirth.

"Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction."

*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*

To stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence is to recognize that no matter the degree of psychological destruction we face, like Dionysus, we can be reborn from tragedy and trauma and return to life stronger than we were before. It is to acknowledge the truth that pain and destruction are often the precursors of self-transformation. It is to be strong enough to say yes to life – to justify it – even when life is, in the words of Nietzsche, "*most terrible, ambiguous, and mendacious.*" In a passage in the Will to Power titled "*Dionysus: To him that has turned out well*", Nietzsche describes the individual who stands in a Dionysian relationship to existence:

"...he has illnesses as great stimulants of his life; he knows how to exploit ill chances; he grows stronger through

the accidents that threaten to destroy him...That of which more delicate men would perish belongs to the stimulants of great health."

*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*

In our age a victim mentality reigns, and many individuals use adversities and traumas as justifications for their personal failures, resentments, pettiness and meanness of character. But we can rise above this weakness of our age. We can strive to be heroic in the face of hardships and recognize that, while traumas and tragedies can break us and tear us into pieces, they can also be the catalyst to a greater health and a greater life.

"A full and powerful soul not only copes with painful, even terrible losses, deprivations, robberies, insults; it emerges from such hells with a greater fullness and powerfulness; and, most essential of all, with a new increase in the blissfulness of love."

*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*

Or as Joseph Campbell wrote:

"Nietzsche was the one who did the job for me. At a certain moment in his life, the idea came to him of what he called 'the love of your fate.' Whatever your fate is, whatever the hell happens, you say, 'This is what I need.' It may look like a wreck, but go at it as though it were an opportunity, a challenge...Any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life. What a privilege!...Then, when looking back at your life, you will see that the moments which seemed to be great failures followed by wreckage were the incidents that shaped the life you have now."

*Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth*



*Cover image credit: [Queven](#)*

**[Connect with Academy of Ideas](#)**