

Accepting Life's Challenges

By

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“This is where Individual Psychology diverges from the theory of determinism: No experience is in itself a cause of our success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences-the so-called trauma-but instead make out of them whatever suits our purposes. We are not determined by our experiences, but are self-determined by the meaning we give to them; and when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life, we are almost certain to be misguided to some degree. Meanings are not determined by situations. We determine ourselves by the meanings we ascribe to situations.”

Alfred Adler (1931) What Life Could Mean to You

These are hopeful words that give us the foundation for Individual Psychology. We are not victims of our heredity, environment, or the past. These factors may influence but do not cause behavior. Instead, we chose our thoughts and behaviors to meet our goal(s). All behavior is purposive.

In other words, we have more control over what we do about what happens to us than we do about those things that actually occur. I think of the countless clients who have experienced some of life's most heart breaking experiences: A tragic death of a love one that could have been prevented with a simple vaccine, attempted murder and a gang rape, neglect and abuse from a parent and/or love one, overdoes of a prescription medication, and a vindictive divorce with a unjustified removal of the children. What happened to each of these clients was unfair and they did not deserve this injustice. With the help of friends, maybe religion, or competent therapists, they did not let this one single heartbreaking event define them, they kept it in perspective. Each one of them some how kept their courage, did not give up on life, and moved toward others.

Most of us start our life out on plan A with hopes, dreams, and desires. Then, twenty years later end up on plan C or D. There are few of us who end up exactly where we pictured ourselves being thirty years ago. We end up with surprises, disappointments, detours, and regrets. Ever since the

beginning of humankind, starting with Adam and Eve, there have been human challenges, disappointments, and misery. Adam and Eve's son, Cain, killed Able, his brother, and fled into exile. Adam and Eve's hearts were broken but they continued to move forward and have more children and live their lives (H. Kushner, **Overcoming Life's Disappointments**, 2006).

It is in our nature to overcome all sorts of human tragedy and we do this by making a choice to focus on our strengths and not being consumed with depression, sadness, and weakness. It is appropriate, at the time of the event to experience these low feelings, but to hang on to them for a lifetime and to move away from others is a mistaken approach. A competent therapist maybe even an understanding friend can help someone realize there are other choices besides staying in a state of misery.

In line with Individual Psychology, research shows that humans are more resilient than what we expect them to be. Many therapist and psychological approaches assume that people who have been traumatized by sexual abuse, accidental death of a loved one, crippling injury, or some other emotional set back, are scarred if not ruined for life. Unknowingly, these approaches can even teach clients how to be victims and use the unfortunate event as a way to define the individual, limit his or her functioning, and to use it as an excuse to move away from others. Evidence indicates that human beings have an surprising ability for emotional healing. They will go through a challenging and maybe painful time, but with the proper support and an emphasis on their strengths they can find their way and once again function and contribute as full fledged human beings.

In the Midwest, potatoes are harvested and often put in a dark cellar for storage. The thinnest beam of sunlight, sneaking through a crack in the cellar door, will stimulate those dormant potatoes to grow sprouts. In contrast, we all have a natural tendency to overcome the darkness and move towards the light. This can be facilitated with the proper conditions and inhibited with improper conditions.

Just labeling someone as a having "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome" or treating someone as a "victim" or "abused" can damage their ability to function. How you recognize and define the problem

determines the outcome. This is in contrast to a more positive approach that uses encouragement, focuses on strengths and not weakness, and defines the situation as “unfortunate”, “tragic”, or perhaps a “challenge to be solved”.

When misfortune moves our way (and it will) we could provide those around us with hope, encouragement, and strength to move forward and to function. These challenges allow us to learn about our strengths and find out who we are. We can use our mistakes, misfortunes, and tragedy to further connect with humanity, to empathize, and understand. Or we can use our “traumas” to disconnect and move away from others, feeling anger, frustration, and victimize by the world. Misfortune and tragedy are here to stay. We can learn how to turn our misfortunes into being the most sorry persons on earth. Or we can learn how to use our misfortunes to give us “a sense of connection with other suffering souls.” The meaning of life is to be help not a burden in spite of the challenges that will face every human being. Adlerian psychology offers us the opportunity to help others function and contribute in spite of the drama that surrounds us all. (Adapted from: Overcoming Life's Disappointments, Harold Kushner