

Some suffering is just suffering. It does not make you stronger

We are told that we can rebuild ourselves into better human beings after a traumatic experience. Sadly, that is not always true.



Chong Siow Ann

As we sit in safe Singapore and watch the horrors of the expanding Israel-Hamas conflict unfold – Gaza had once aspired to be the Singapore of the Middle East – I find it impossible to comprehend and imagine the suffering of the survivors who had their children killed and homes destroyed; who have lost everything including their future; and who are still trapped in that unending cycle of more destruction and more deaths. It is suffering on an industrial scale.

As a practising psychiatrist, it is often individual suffering that I encounter. And even then, it can be difficult at times to grasp the full extent and degree of anguish of those to whom unspeakable things have happened.

Some lives are scarred by terrible intimate wounds: A husband who killed his wife while in the throes of blinding delusions, a woman with post-partum depression who in the darkest moment of hopelessness killed her baby, a daughter who believed that she had thoughtlessly pushed her father to kill himself.

The awful realisation – that comes ironically as they emerge from their illness – of what they have done brings a different and

more lasting suffering in its tow.

To live, as the German philosopher Nietzsche has it, is to suffer; and to survive is to make sense of the suffering. For the Buddha, suffering is the first rule and reality of life, and hence universally inescapable.

And yet there are those of us who try to tell you that suffering can bring redemption, that it will make you stronger and help you grow. Is that really true?

The realists among us are aware that we must endure some suffering but would still hope that our share of personal failures, broken relationships, sickness, deaths of family and friends, and ultimately our own demise, would be evenly and bearably dispensed through our life. These are painful, yes, but we accept them as part of our quotidian life.

What we don't expect is the truly monstrous and unbearable – massacres, terrorist attacks, wars, rockets raining down from the sky, murdered children – to happen to us. The sort of life-shattering and soul-destroying suffering that the writer Norman Rush calls "hellmouth": The opening up of the mouth of hell right in front of you, without warning, through no fault of your own or of your own choosing, and where there seems to be no ending.

Can we really find a silver lining in this?

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

There are some who tell us that suffering brings clarity, illumination, wisdom, profundity and even religious or spiritual redemption. There is a theory

which has been developed by a couple of American psychologists in the mid-1990s, called post-traumatic growth.

As the theory goes, post-traumatic growth emerges painfully from that process of struggling with the fallout of a traumatic event – a transformation that is manifested by a heightened connection with and compassion towards others, a deeper appreciation and gratitude for life, and a renewed purpose in life. It is the result of someone picking up and putting the broken shards of a life back together, which also takes in the suffering.

Like a pair of lenses, it gives them a new perspective that alters how they see themselves and the external world, and gives them a better understanding of how to live life. It is, more or less, an affirmation of Nietzsche's pithy aphorism about "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger".

Research found evidence of post-traumatic growth in the survivors of many different crises – including relationship break-ups, bereavement, cancers, serious mental illnesses, sexual abuse, natural catastrophes and wars. And it seemed to be astoundingly common, with some estimates suggesting that as many as 70 per cent of trauma survivors attain post-traumatic growth.

Proponents of this theory state that such growth does not require extraordinary external or internal resources. But it does require a willingness to adapt to circumstances, a steely endurance of the suffering, and an imaginative reframing of one's life – all of which admittedly requires considerable energy and determination. It seems that the ones who respond best are those who are able to re-cast their lives in the most positive ways and extract new meanings.

An often-cited exemplar of

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post-traumatic growth is the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who was interned in the Auschwitz and Dachau concentration camps during World War II.

Despite the deaths of his pregnant wife and almost his entire family, Dr Frankl went on to lead a life after these camps that was rich with meaning and pleasure. During his time in the camps, he helped his fellow prisoners by getting them to focus on the lives they might lead after the war, like the work they would

do or bringing up their children. In his seminal 1946 (and most famous) book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, he writes: "It was a question of getting them to realise that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them."

He observed that those who suffer were spurred to help others because it gave meaning that salved their own suffering. Those prisoners who despaired and lost faith in the future also lost their "spiritual hold" on themselves, and they rapidly deteriorated mentally and physically. The key, according to Dr Frankl, was to find meaning in life, no matter how straitened the circumstances.

MYTH OF REDEMPITIVE SUFFERING

The idea of post-traumatic growth is a compelling one; it is a secular gospel of redemption and salvation which understandably makes us want to cling to it and believe in it.

There is no doubt that some people would experience a positive transformation after trauma – I have seen semblances of that in a number of my patients with serious mental illnesses – but not all people would because, being human, we are so different and complicated.

The Yale developmental psychologist Paul Bloom believes that Dr Frankl is an outlier whose case has been overly used to promulgate what he called the "myth of redemptive suffering". He argued that there is some suffering that brings no benefits. Nor does he think that post-traumatic growth is altogether common. He criticised as methodically flawed those clinical studies that show that suffering makes people more resilient or altruistic. Life, he writes, "has no screenwriter and

no director. And so, when we suffer through bad events, we can't be confident that things will work out in the end".

In some instances, this narrative around the potential to grow after suffering could be tyrannical. It raises a double expectation: Not only does the individual have to recover from what happened, but he is supposed to become better than ever before – additional pressure on somebody who has already suffered a terrible event and is still undergoing a terrible time.

Each individual's ordeal and consequent response to it is different from another's. We help by providing whatever support they personally need to come to terms and reconcile with what has happened, without imposing a preconceived notion of the trajectory of their recovery.

And just as I find it impossible and gauche to even think of or wish for the post-traumatic growth of those present and future civilian victims of the Israel-Hamas war, I found myself not being able to tell some of my patients who had suffered horrendous losses that they could get something positive out of it (having no conviction of that myself) or that time would be a healer (we know that it is sometimes not the case).

The truth is that I, too, do not know why such things happen to people. Their past is irrevocable, and their future unpredictable.

Occasionally, their suffering compounded my sense of helplessness and made me wish, like a coward, that I wouldn't have to see them. But I found myself sitting with them, trying to provide whatever support they needed to reconcile with what had happened, without imposing a preconceived notion of the trajectory of their recovery. It is mostly letting them talk, and conveying to them that I, too, felt their pain.

And pain-stricken, they continue with their life, which, in itself, is indicative of some resolve and some lessons that they have for the rest of us. They make me think of the Irish novelist and dramatist Samuel Beckett's seemingly paradoxical line from one of his novels: "I can't go on. I'll go on".

• Professor Chong Siow Ann is a senior consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health.

Palestinian children looking at buildings destroyed during Israeli strikes on Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, in November. It can be difficult at times to grasp the full extent and degree of anguish of those to whom unspeakable things have happened, the writer says.
PHOTO: AFP



Helplines

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours) /1-767 (24 hours)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
- Women's Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- eC2.sg
- tinklefriend.sg
- chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)