

Embrace Your Experiences

Each of us has a collection of experiences that make our lives unique. Those experiences come in both the pleasant and the painful varieties, but they all play an essential role in making us who we are. We all enjoy recalling the times when we shared some special occasion with someone we loved, achieved some success in academics or sports, or achieved some goal, such as graduation or a new job. These times are important in affirming that we are capable, lovable, and valuable and play a critical part in developing our sense of confidence and self-worth.

However, it is the most painful and difficult circumstances that arouse in us characteristics such as compassion, gentleness, kindness and generosity. For good or for ill, our painful experiences have a great influence over how we interact with other people, especially those closest to us. From our experiences, we learn to trust or not trust, to tell the truth or to mislead, to see life as full of promise or full of dread. Two people who experience very similar circumstances can arrive on the other side with two very different perspectives on all of these.

Even in the midst of all the strain brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, the way we choose to integrate these experiences into our lives is the determining factor on how we allow them to shape the person we are. Our initial reaction to many such experiences is to feel bitter, angry, or resentful that such things have happened to us. We can lose ourselves in self-blame for mistakes or poor choices we have made. If we view these circumstances strictly through a lens of regret, we can allow them to follow us around like dark clouds, darkening our view of ourselves, our lives and those around us.

Having an overbearing sense of regret, defeat and failure can become an insidious toxin in the way we see ourselves and others. This can cause us to place unhealthy demands on our relationships and circumstances to provide an unreasonable amount of satisfaction, hoping that some success or pleasure in life will compensate for our painful past and make it all worth it.

We can learn to appreciate life's misfortunes if we begin to see the way they have helped us develop positive, more mature, traits in our dealing with other people, as well as the way we see ourselves. How would you have compassion on others in their painful experiences if you had not had any of your own? How can you lend support to someone facing loss, disappointment or failure if all you had known is success?

We owe a lot to our past in helping to shape the way we see ourselves and others, and the current national crisis is no exception. But whether this is a productive affect or a burden is a choice that each of us has to make. While it is tempting to dwell on wishing things had been different, we cannot change many of the circumstances that affect us, either now or in the past. Just as you wouldn't want to drive very far staring into the rearview mirror, a successful journey in life requires you to focus on where you are headed more than what you have left behind. With a positive perspective and a focus on the future, we can manage how we use our experiences to make the rest of our lives more satisfying.

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