



Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

BUSINESS | OCTOBER 18, 2010

Study Finds Adversity Does Make Us Stronger

By LAURA LANDRO

Friedrich Nietzsche was right—sort of.

The German philosopher's oft-quoted adage, "What does not destroy me, makes me stronger," was put to the test as part of a national study of the effects of adverse life events on mental health by researchers at the University at Buffalo—the State University of New York and the University of California, Irvine.

The study, published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, found that people who had experienced a few adverse events in their lives reported better mental health and well being than people with a history of frequent adversity and people with no history of misfortune.

The study, which included 2,398 participants ranging in age from 18 to 101, is part of a larger research effort started after Sept. 11, 2001 to test the notion of resilience—how successfully people adapt after exposure to stressful or potentially traumatic life events or circumstances.

In studies of human resilience over the last three decades, particular adverse events, including physical or sexual assault, the loss of a parent, homelessness and natural disasters, have generally been linked to poorer mental-health outcomes. Studies of people who suffer disability or unemployment have shown lower life satisfaction that lasted over at least several years. And more adversity has generally predicted worse outcomes.

But Mark Seery, a researcher at the Department of Psychology at the University at Buffalo who co-authored the new study, says many studies have focused on personal characteristics or social resources that promote resilience. But the potential benefits of exposure to some adversity, relative to no adversity, have received less attention, he says.

Dr. Seery says his study shows that, under the right conditions, experiencing some adversity may foster resilience. Participants were asked whether they had experienced each of 37 negative events and the ages at which they occurred. Subjects with a history of some lifetime adversity showed lower distress, fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and higher life satisfaction. They also appeared to handle recent adverse events better than other participants. Dr. Seery says age, personality characteristics and social support systems had no measurable impact on the relationship between adversity and mental health.

"So much of the existing literature shows that having experience with a negative life event is bad, with negative effects on mental and physical health," says Dr. Seery. "But we've found that that is not the whole story, and that people are more resilient in general than we may think."

Adversity, Dr. Seery adds, can help people develop a "psychological immune system" to help them cope with the slings and arrows that life throws, while those with no experience of adversity may have a hard time dealing with tough times.

At the same time, higher levels of adversity, the study found, can overtax coping skills and support networks, creating feelings of hopelessness and loss of control, disrupting the development of toughness and taking a toll on mental health and well-being. Under those circumstances, Dr. Seery says, even the most minor hassles can seem overwhelming.

Dr. Seery says people who have experienced around two to four adverse events in their lifetimes appeared to be the best off. Recent events—within the last six to 18 months—signaled worse mental health on the whole, suggesting that it may take time for an experience of adversity to bolster resilience.

Ann Masten, an expert in resilience in young people at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, says that even if people are capable of adapting to adversity, it is still important to have community and social networks in place to help people deal with the aftermath of adverse events. "We do have enormous capacity for resilience, but that doesn't mean horrible experiences are good for you," says Dr. Masten. "We need to have a better understanding of how protective systems work and how to mobilize them when they aren't present."

About 53% of the adversity-study participants were female, and nearly 74% identified themselves as white, non-Hispanic.

Write to Laura Landro at laura.landro@wsj.com

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com