

## **Redemption Stories**

People often have a special story about how a major setback or challenge in their life led to a positive outcome. These are stories of how adversity resulted in something beneficial and good. These are stories of the redemptive self (McAdams, 2013).

Redemption is not just release from an affliction but includes arrival at a better place. That new place may have never been reached without first going through the related adversity, or so the story goes. Redemption narratives are among the favorite plotlines of the life story. Remember that a person's story emanates from interpretations. Stories of redemption are founded in how one chooses to see their world and the events of their life.

A person cannot control everything that happens in their life, every event and every nuance. The world is much too complex. No matter how positive one's attitude is, unplanned situations occur. A major illness, a natural disaster, or losing one's job can happen to most anyone unexpectedly. A person cannot stop every debilitating event. However, one can control the meaning they give that event, which impacts their physical and mental health (McAdams, 2013). Stories of redemption integrate agency. The story's hero makes some decision or takes some action that leads to deliverance from the impact of adversity. Suffering is redeemed as the hero learns and becomes enlightened in some way, undergoing a personal transformation. Regardless of the physical outcome, one can still write a story of redemption.

## **Benefit-finding**

Redemption stories are written by finding benefits in adversity. Studies support "that people who perceive benefits in adversity tend to show better recovery from and

adjustment to the negative events that brought them adversity in the first place”

(McAdams, 2013, p.15). Research has shown that those who incorporate stories of redemption into their narrative identity and who live themes of personal agency experience higher levels of well-being (Adler, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013). And although more studies are needed, existing research indicates that the stories come first, followed by improvements in mental health.

Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) conducted research with a large group of high-school seniors. All participants had been scored for psychological well-being in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The students were asked to write about a turning point event in their life that happened between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. These turning point events could be either negatively or positively valenced such as a parents’ divorce or meeting one’s best friend. Turning point stories were coded for meaning-making which was defined as either learning a lesson or gaining new insights. Learning a lesson referred to adopting a healthier, more acceptable way of behavior. Gaining new insights referred to adopting a general change in an attitude about life. Participants were also re-accessed for psychological well-being. In comparing 9<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade well-being scores, students who reported meaning-making in their turning point narrative, showed significant improvement.

In a longitudinal study, male heart-attack patients were interviewed approximately seven weeks after their incidents (Affleck, et al., 1987; see also McAdams, 2013). A small majority of the men described benefits resulting from their condition. For example, some said they had learned to improve their health behaviors like diet and exercise. Some stated they were making life-style changes such as taking a more relaxing pace. And others had

altered their life-philosophy like valuing their family more. The participants were followed by the researchers for a period of eight years. Those who had reported perceived benefits at seven weeks were less likely to have another heart attack over the following eight years. At eight years, surviving participants who had stated perceived benefits had lower rates of illness than those who had not stated any perceived benefits.

In another study, early-stage breast cancer patient volunteers were randomly assigned to an experimental group or control group. Those in the benefit-finding experimental condition were asked to write positive impressions and benefits gained from their experience with breast cancer (Stanton, et al., 2002; see also Bower, et al., 2009, McAdams, 2013). Those in the control condition were asked to write only factual information about their cancer and treatment. Patients participated in four, twenty-minute writing sessions within a three-week period. They were then asked to track any physical symptoms experienced over the next three months and to keep a record of any non-routine medical appointments for cancer-related problems. Participants in the benefit-finding group reported significantly fewer somatic symptoms and medical visits over the three months than did the control group. Those who expressed positive interpretations about their cancer experienced reduced cancer-related issues and better health compared to those who did not.

The psychological betterment from benefit-finding extends beyond the context of a person's solely personal life story. One's life story is also comprised of events and meaning making that goes beyond their immediate, personal lives (McAdams, 2013). A study was conducted to assess how benefit finding in a national tragedy would impact a person's

psychological well-being (Adler & Poulin, 2009; see also McAdams, 2013). Two months after the 9/11 attacks, 395 American adults completed open-ended questionnaires about their reactions to the assaults. They also completed a survey to measure psychological well-being. Participants who conveyed a positive benefit and found meaning for the country registered higher degrees of well-being. Respondents who related to the events of 9/11 with negative meaning scored higher levels of psychological distress. Although a causal relationship was not established, there was a strong association between writing stories of national redemption, and positive mental health.

## References

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