

There's no sugarcoating it: Sometimes life hurts.

Losses, heartbreaks, setbacks of all kinds can rock us to the core. "Feeling bad after your life is upended is totally normal," says Sarah Lowe, PhD, assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences at the Yale School of Public Health. "But humans are also programmed to be resilient—to grow and learn from even difficult things."

Psychologists are increasingly studying the possibilities of what's known as post-traumatic growth: that surviving hard periods in life can often make us more focused, more compassionate, more spiritual, and more aware of our own strengths and possibilities. A multiyear study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that the emotionally healthiest subjects had experienced some kind of significant adversity, such as divorce, the loss of a loved one, or a grave illness.

"These events can shake us and strip away our assumptions. They push you to reexamine what is most important," says Ann Marie Roepke, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Evoke Training and Consulting in Seattle. "You learn things about yourself you never would if life was clear sailing."

That's not to diminish the suffering such events cause, notes Roepke: "Pain and growth can coexist." Know there may be stops and starts. "Post-traumatic growth is a journey, and everyone is on their own timeline," adds Laura Silberstein-Tirch, PsyD, a psychotherapist in New York City and author of *The Everyday Guide to Self-Compassion: How to Be Nice to Yourself*. "It can start with small moments of just noticing what you are feeling and accepting it rather than fighting it." Often psychotherapy can be a crucial tool in helping

you work through your feelings and find meaning, Silberstein-Tirch explains.

Need some inspiration? Here are some hard-earned lessons from people who have been there. They show how our lowest moments can pave the way to richer lives. "Just knowing growth is possible after trauma can itself be healing," says Roepke. "As long as we don't pressure or shame ourselves for our struggle."

Allow your hard times to teach you compassion

A LONGTIME MEDITATION teacher and author of books including *The Four Noble Truths of Love*, Susan Piver still has struggles like anyone else. "Once I was wrestling with a painful relationship problem that was really troubling me," Piver recalls. "I went around and around

with it. I just couldn't think my way out." Frustrated, Piver sought the counsel of one of her teachers, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist sage.

"I expected this brilliant scholar to give me a doorway to open, advice that would make the problem go away. Instead Rinpoche told me, 'Think of how much compassion you will have in the future for others who are struggling with this too.'"

Piver says, "It was an extraordinary moment." His remark changed her feelings of isolation into ones of deep connection with others: "I went from thinking, 'What's wrong with me? How come I can't fix this?' to realizing everyone suffers. Countless people are struggling right now." That realization was empowering, she says. "My heart will open to them." Your own difficult times can be a powerful engine of empathy, too. "There is something about being with people who have experienced exactly what you have that trumps every other form of help."

YOUR STORY, REIMAGINED

"There are the facts of your life; then there is the story you tell yourself about those facts," says Kim Schneiderman, LCSW, MSW, a psychotherapist in New York City and the author of *Step Out of Your Story: Writing Exercises to Reframe and Transform Your Life*. We naturally conceive of our own lives as a plot line, she argues. While you may not be able to control events, you can control how you interpret them. "Think of them as turning points in your story. Imagine yourself as a hero who grows and learns from these challenges."

Look at Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* as an example, she says. "You could tell her story one way: 'A poor girl wasn't understood by her family, she got hit by a tornado, she was almost killed by a witch.' Or you could tell it another: 'A brave girl overcame obstacles, learned the importance of relationships, realized her own strength, and appreciated the value of home.'"

Viewing yourself as a hero isn't about glossing over life's difficulties by slapping on a happy ending. A tough experience makes you face yourself in ways you might have been too scared or too busy or too lazy to do at a different time—it makes you braver.