

Research Article

Positive Psychology in Times of Adversity: Pandemic and Well-being in Daily Life

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ABSTRACT

Our life on earth often is dashed by hardships, losses, and crises. Naturally, these adverse life events and tragedies create doubt and disbelief about the meaning of life, and our human mind engaged with helplessness, despair, and negativity. However, human's physical and psychological immune systems have programmed through the evolutionary process of survival of the fittest. It makes us capable of overcoming the threats and adversities and showing greater resilience and courage to respond to the demand. At present, the COVID -19 pandemic has paralyzed human life in all aspects irrespective of the social, economic status across the world in 216 countries, areas, or territories. Pandemic causes panic, insecure feelings about life and death, fear of transmission of infection, and so on. The field of positive psychology studies human strengths and potentials that are the ingredients of our well-being, resilience, adjustment, and adaptation to any adverse situations of life. This review article attempts to show the relevance of positive psychology and how positive psychological adaptation and its constructs help to strengthen humankind in times of adversity.

Keywords: positive psychological adaptation, resilience, positive emotions, character strengths, COVID -19,

1. INTRODUCTION

In our childhood, we are more pampered and protected by our parents and other caretakers. As we grow and mature, we learn to become stronger. Under difficulties, adversities, and troubles, we have learned to get adjusted to life. Psychologically healthy and resilient persons bounce back and get through the circumstances and maintain balance in times of adversity. Especially at present, the COVID -19 pandemic threatens the whole of humanity across the world with severe effects.

According to Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and the virtues that enable positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life."(M. E. P. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi

2014). Through the process of adaptation and adjustment, all living beings become capable of balancing and survive among challenges and changes of life. It is seen both as an inbuilt ability and a learned mechanism to be adept over different situations. Positive psychological adaptation levels of individuals boost their resilience and coping. It is enhanced by a group of psychological and social resources like self-esteem, optimism, internal control, acceptance, and seeking emotional support that pacifies the effects caused by the trials and tribulations of their life (Ambriz et al. 2012).

The psychological constructs like positive adaptation, positive functioning, well-being, human strengths and virtues, positive emotions, hope, meaning, purpose, resilience, flow, mindfulness, coping, etc., have been studied by positive psychology. It will be more suitable and opt for this traumatic situation, to understand how humanity has the inner ability to bounce back from adversities and difficulties. Thus, reflecting positive psychology constructs and the positive psychological adaptation at times of this pandemic COVID 19 could be relevant to think about our inbuilt capacities and to appreciate the positive aspects of humanity.

2. Pandemics and its impact on life

The spread of epidemics and pandemics is not new to human life down the ages. From the nomadic lifestyle of the old stone age (paleolithic) to the present digital era, humankind has met various diseases. The word 'Pandemics' derived from the Greek word *pandēmos* (from *pan* 'all' + *dēmos* 'people') + *-ic* in the 17th century. According to the Oxford dictionary *Pandemic*, means 'of disease prevalent over a whole country or the world. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as 'occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population' ("Definition of PANDEMIC" n.d.) A pandemic is simply an epidemic on a very wide geographical scale.

In prehistory, men lived as a small group survived in wooded areas and, their contact with the animals was also close. They domesticated animals for agriculture, transportation, and other purposes of livelihood. It is, therefore, not surprising that many of the infectious diseases common to humans are also identifiable in animals. The infections spread to humankind from animal diseases, being injured by their attacks, through its excretion such as urine, feces, and the consumption of animal meat. Besides, some diseases contracted from the soil, such as anaerobic bacteria and tapeworms that penetrate the skin (White 2009). So, the spread of diseases and ailments were there from the beginning of our human existence.

There was the spread of epidemics that devastated many people from the beginning, but historically an epidemic in Athens (430–427 B.C.E) was recorded first by the Athenian historian Thucydides. The series of powerful epidemics shook humanity from time to time. They were Antonine plague (165 A.D.), Cyprian Plague (250 A.D.), Justinian Plague (541 A.D.), Black Death (1347–1353 A.D.), Plague in Italian Cities(1630), Plague in London (1665), Plague

in Marseilles (1720–1722), Plague in Moscow (1771), Epidemics in America (16th century), Cholera Pandemic in Russia (1817), China (1855), Fiji Measles Pandemic (1875), Russian Flu (1889), Spanish flu (1918), Asian flu (1957), and HIV/AIDS identified in 1981 in America (Hays 2005).

In the 21st century, in November 2002, the pandemic of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) terrified the world, and people were dying horribly while both the cause and the principal mode of spread were unknown (Doherty 2013). In 2019 December COVID-19 caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) first appeared in China (Dehkordi et al. 2020) and spread globally to more than 216 countries. (“Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) – World Health Organization” n.d.)

The pandemic has become a real threat to our human existence. The negative impact of it is the suffering of the illness and the loss of lives and bereavements. Even human life is extremely comfortable with the advancement of technology and science, microscopic microbes’ power over the innovations and developments. Loss of human life, risk of health, and socio-economic crisis filled the mind of people with uncertainty, fear, and hopelessness (Qiu et al. 2017). So, the pandemic caused effects in life and, every individual has been affected in one way or another.

Table 1. To highlight pandemics and its effects on life

Psychological effects	Economic effects	Social effects
Loss of human life.	Economic crisis; all the markets, companies, and shops closed.	Social distance & prohibition of social gatherings.
Pain of loved ones infected with the disease.	Poverty & struggle to meet the basic needs, daily wagers suffer due to the loss of a job.	Social stigma of COVID 19 isolating the individual and their families.
Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and insecure feeling about life.	Leaders of the country bewildered to manage the system & give health services.	No transportation
Mental health issues and emotional disturbances out of quarantine and less socialization.	Loaded with healthcare expenditure.	Lifestyle changes in lockdown. Schools, colleges are closed

3. Positive Psychological adaptation and Pandemics

All living organisms and creatures have been gifted with the potentials to adapt and cope up with the dangerous situations of life. They become capable of facing environmental threats and challenges. Thus, the adaptation and developmental adjustment are inbuilt in our physique. Adaptation is the process by which an organism becomes fitted to its environment; in a great variety of ways: in their structure, physiology, and genetics, in their locomotion or dispersal, in their means of defense and attack, in their reproduction and development, and other respects (Encyclopedia Britannica and Inc. 2008), with that adaptation, their lives built suitable to survive and reproduce in their habitats in the face of changes. More than this, human life is created amazingly with rational thinking, intelligence, and emotions to challenge and to balance our life on earth successfully.

Positive psychology studies our inner human potentials and the factors which make our life worth. In the context of risk, adversity, and trauma, our resilience capacity fosters the positive adaptation to bounce back from those stressful situations. The concept of hedonic adaptation, also known as the hedonic treadmill, is studied by the positive psychologists Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues have explained that people can return to well-being and happiness despite the good and bad times. Through her studies on happiness, Lyubomirsky shows that 50% of happiness determined by our DNA (genetic), 10% of circumstances beyond our control, 40% are within our control (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2019).

Fredrickson also describes the evolutionary adaptations of our emotions by her broaden – and – build a theory of positive emotions and upward spiral model of positive emotions. Her study conducted on the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, (Fredrickson et al. 2003) connects the link between positive emotions and resilience that positive emotions widen the space of attention and cognition thereby, it enables us to recognize the resources of our resilience to wrestle with the adversities of life successfully. Positive emotions increase psychological, social, and physical well-being in ways that fuel human flourishing. Hence being happy is inherited in our heredity and, we have control over circumstances like pandemics. Each difficulty in life has shaped our human lives. All the inventions and creations are the brainchild of the human mind who sought the solutions for the problem faced. Through positive psychological adaptation, humans can bounce back and be resilient to the changes. In such cases, these diseases, pandemics, and epidemics also have shaped what we are today. It became a causative agent of change for our history, religious traditions, social interaction, and technology (Loomis 2018). History is written not only by men but also by microbes (Kolbert 2020).

Positive psychological adaptation is centered around future-oriented thinking, gaining life experience, and self-management with coping skills, so it strengthens the adaptation of

the people to meet the pandemic successfully now and in the future. COVID 19 also has brought a significant change in our lifestyle, social structure, politics, religion, science, education, economy, family, and so on. Despite its havoc effects, human society can move further by adapting to the new situation.

- People were able to perceive the sufferings and the needs of the others and have extended their help and support. It has brought out the kindness and compassion of humanity. Health care professionals are rendering their service at the risk of their own lives.
- All began to adopt the new lifestyle of living in a different reality of the virtual world. School kids to college students are learning online. Online business is getting started in all the forums.
- The less travel, social gathering, and the fewer functions of hotels and shops have made our environment clean and pure (Zowalaty et al. 2020). As the Industries and automobiles become functionless, levels of air pollution, noise pollution, and greenhouse emission reduced and, our ecosystem got the chance of cleansing process.
- The animals, birds, and fish in the water are enjoying the free movement of moving, flying, and roaming around without our human interference.
- The busy life has become quiet and calm. People were so busy with different activities to fulfill all their daily needs and, even they were not able to spend quality time with the family. Lockdown has created the space for every family to stay together, enrich their relationships, and their sense of belongingness. The children are free and engage their time in play and fun activities.
- Awareness increased among everyone about health and hygiene practices (using sanitizer, mask, keep distancing, acts like covering noses and mouths while sneezing or cough) and self-care measures (washing hands, cleaning the house, and environment).
- Quarantine has become an experience of deep reflection of the meaning of life and, many have utilized it to bring out their creations. ("Life in the Time of Coronavirus Lockdown" n.d.), ("Things We Learned to Appreciate More during COVID-19 Lockdown" n.d.).
- Many more research articles, write-ups, essays, and books have been written and published about pandemics. That has added up the knowledge from different perspectives.
- The nations have started to strengthen the public health system to meet the pandemic successfully and come forward to collaborate with the different organizations within the country and with the other nations to restore the situation, to prevent the spread of viruses, to invent the vaccine, and to heal the people.

4. Positive psychology in times of adversity

In times of adversity and uncertainty, humanity has always turned with the hope that life will become better and, the problem will become solved undoubtedly. In such instances, positive psychology plays an important role; to tap the resources, potentials from the individual to manifest their best self to deal with the demands of those stressful situations. Numerous constructs have been studied in positive psychology by the researchers to understand the mechanism of our positive living and to prove how the individual can hold on and endure in difficult moments. Table1 highlights some important constructs derived from Positive psychology in connection with adaptability and positive functioning to mastery over the uncertainties in life.

Table 2. List of Positive psychology concepts concerning adaptability and positive functioning at times of adversity

Positive psychologists	Concepts	Connection to adaptability / positive functioning/mastery over the uncertainties in life
Peterson and Seligman	<p>Virtues and Character strengths (VIA) Character Strengths are the positive parts of the personality of an individual that impact all the aspects of life. 24 strengths are classified into 6 categories of virtues (Peterson and Seligman 2004).</p>	<p>Recognizing one's strength gives energy and competence in making a successful and happier life. So, building strengths helps the individual to function at an optimal level in times of uncertainty. (Shoshani and Slone 2016)</p>
Scheier and Carver	<p>Optimism: Optimism is described as the stable tendency to believe that good rather than bad things will happen."(M. F. Scheier and Carver 1985).</p>	<p>With optimism, the individual perceives the good outcome over problematic circumstances and moves towards desirable goals. It induces higher coping over stressors, physical and psychological ailments, and improves well-being. (Michael F. Scheier, Carver, and Bridges, n.d.)</p>

Martin Seligman	Learned optimism: The theory of learned optimism, directs the individuals to be an optimist, and to embrace adaptive causal attributions towards bad and good events that happen to them. (M. Seligman 2018)	Optimist – views failure to external, variable, specific attribution. Distance oneself from negative outcomes and link oneself with positive outcomes. Pessimist – views failure to Internal, stable, and global attribution. Link oneself from negative outcomes and distance oneself from a positive outcome.
Albert Bandura	Self-efficacy: Bandura defined self-efficacy as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their actions." (Bandura, Freeman, and Lightsey 1999)	Through self-efficacy, individuals actively shape their lives rather than passively reacting to environmental forces and have coped over them. It brings psychological adjustment and adaptive biological immune functioning. (O'Leary and Brown 1995)
Emmy Werner	Resilience: Resilience is described as a good developmental outcome despite high-risk status, sustained competence under stress, recovery from trauma(Werner 1995).	Resilience fosters adaptation and good living through bounce back and overcoming life's challenges. It also encompasses our stability in times of hardship.
C.R. Snyder	Hope: Hope as goal-directed thinking in which the person utilizes pathways (a sense of being able to generate plans to meet the desired goals) and agency thinking (a sense of successful determination in meeting goals) (Snyder et al. 1991).	Stress is perceived differently depending on the person's overall level of hope. With high hope, the individual can overcome stressful impediments to apply efforts and attain success. Hope fosters our superior performance in difficult times.

Barbara
Fredrickson

Positive emotions

positive emotions such as interest, joy, contentment, and love are highly adaptive for humans (Fredrickson and Joiner 2002).

Positive emotions broaden our thinking and coping, generate resources, and vital energy. Improves health, well-being, resilience, and adaptive functions.

Diener, Seligman,
Ryff, Lyubomirsky,
etc.

Well-being (Subjective and objective approaches) / flourishing

Diener defines well-being as a combination of positive affect and general life satisfaction. It is the subjective evaluation of one's current status in the world how appreciates and experiences the pleasure of life. (Diener 2009)

Happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being are identical. It is studied widely by many researchers. All these constructs emphasize that happy individuals understand their psychological strengths and its implications in daily life and can adapt to the changing circumstances, life changes, and feel better in times of misery.

Victor Frankl

Meaning, Purpose

Frankl believed that humans are motivated by something called a "will to meaning," which equates to a desire to find meaning in life even in desperate situations. (Frankl 2011)

Positive psychology conceptualizes meaning and purpose as an activating mechanism to elicit happiness, optimal functioning, and satisfaction with life.

Jon Kabat Zinn,
etc.

Mindfulness

Cultivating an awareness of everyday life and being in the present moment. (Kabat-Zinn 2005)

Through mindfulness, individuals develop deep insight into mental processes and experience the optimal level of psychological well-being, physical and mental health. It helps to accept mindfully the uncertainty of everyday life.

(Csikszentmihalyi 2020)	Flow Intense engagement on what one is doing in the present moment. (Csikszentmihalyi 2020)	Here the individual merging action and awareness responds constructively to whatever happens at the moment. Through flow experience one has control of one's actions, high skills, and commitment to the high challenges.
Furlong et al.,	Covitality Defined "the synergistic effect of positive mental health resulting from the combination of multiple positive-psychological strengths and assets"(Renshaw et al., n.d.).	It comprises the psychological dispositions in four areas: belief-in-self, belief-in-others, emotional competence, engaged living that promotes positive mental health among school-going children to youth.

5. Preserving well-being in everyday life at times of adversity

In this 21st century, our human life is more comfortable or elegant with high technology, more productivity, sound healthcare system, longer life expectancy, advancements in science and technology and, it connects the world and merges all the sectors of our life. On the other hand, we are challenged with a lot of unfortunate and adverse situations and pressed with so many issues from global to individual-level like climate changes, natural disasters, a civil war between nations, increase of refugees, disputes between states and groups, poverty, the spread of diseases, and so on. Every day we could meet some uncertain events in different intensities creates unrest within and around us. And we know that we cannot expect the complete transformation of the world without any problems. To withstand the hard times of our everyday life, especially with the misfortune of COVID 19, positive psychology becomes a great aid and assists to safeguard our well-being. The challenge created by Coronavirus and any other causal agent of diseases is a threat to our immune system. Application of positive emotions, thoughts, and behavior increases our optimism and resilience; it nourishes and reinforces our immune system. The concept of learned optimism explicated by Martin Seligman in detail the benefits of optimism in terms of our physical and mental health and studied through many studies. (M. Seligman 2018)

Positive psychology is the science of well-being studies about the 'good life' of the people suggests the practice of the skills to maintain balance in our thoughts, emotions, and behavior positively at times of troubles and hardships. It empowers the individual to

be more effective in dealing with those situations with high resilience and optimism to preserve the well-being and mental health. Well-being is looked at from the perspectives of subjective, psychological, social, and emotional well-being. It views the individual integrally positive functioning and mental health in everyday life and enhances the capacity to restore well-being during difficult life circumstances (Lent 2004).

5.1. POSITIVE THOUGHTS

At difficult times our thoughts will be clouded with negativity and confusion with uncertainties. These thinking distortions are identified by the cognitive theorists Aaron Beck and David Burns which are also called thinking traps and cognitive biases. It distorts our cognition and leads our attention only to the negativity, and imagination about negative outcomes. The following cognitive distortions are illustrated by David Burns in his book 'Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy' (Burns 2012)

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- 1. ALL OR NOTHING THINKING:** It is also called black and white thinking, where we look at situations in terms of one extreme or the other. If our performance falls short of perfect, we see ourselves as a total failure.
 - 2. OVER GENERALIZING:** Seeing a single negative event and drawing conclusions that negative events will occur again and again unendingly.
 - 3. MENTAL FILTER:** Only paying attention to negative events and perceive the whole situation as negative and ignoring positive events, like the drop of ink that colors the entire beaker of water.
 - 4. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** Discounting the good things that have happened or that we have done. Inability to appreciate the good things that happen
 - 5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** There are two key types of jumping to conclusions; Mind reading - we arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to us, and we don't bother to check this out. b. The Fortune Teller Error - we anticipate that things will turn out badly, and we feel convinced that our prediction is an already-established fact.
 - 6. MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:** we exaggerate the importance of things (such as our mistakes or the insignificant event), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your desirable qualities or the significant events). This is also called the "binocular trick."
 - 7. EMOTIONAL REASONING:** we assume that our emotions as the evidence for the truth and necessarily reflect the way things are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."
 - 8. SHOULD STATEMENTS:** we try to motivate ourselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts as if we had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything.

"Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct, 'should' statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

9. LABELING AND MISLABELING: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing our error, we attach a negative label to ourselves: "I'm a loser." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

10. PERSONALIZATION: we see ourselves as the cause of some negative external event which in fact we were not primarily responsible for.

Source: From the book 'Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy' by David Burns, pp47-48

By recognizing our thinking traps, we could modify our thought pattern with the help of the models of the cognitive triad (Negative view about oneself, others and the world) by Aaron Beck, ABCD (Activating event, Belief, Consequences, Dispute) model by Albert Ellis, ABCDE (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences, Disputation, Energization) model by Martin Seligman. It helps to overcome from reacting from our habitual thought patterns of negativity to positive thought patterns. It questions and disputes our beliefs and brightens our view about the situation at times of uncertainty and adversity.

5.2. POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive emotions expand our awareness, allowing us to step beyond the limited sense of negativity to explore new situations and ideas. The practices suggested by Barbara Fredrickson and other researchers on positive emotions shows that the individual can cultivate positive emotions in their day to day life by shifting their focus intently from the ordinary view of looking at things into the lens of a positive attitude. It fuels resilience, serving as the means through which people can compete in the face of adversity.

1. Loving – Kindness Meditation (LKM): It Generates positive emotions that lead to wellbeing and building personal resources. (Fredrickson et al. 2008)

2. Prioritizing Positivity: The individual seeks positive emotional experiences by making decisions about how to organize day- to – day life by allotting time for doing things that we love to do. Like gardening, writing, spending time with loved ones, listening to music, etc.

3. Positivity Resonance – How our supreme emotions (especially love) affect how we feel, think, do, and become. It is a science of love that shapes the way we connect with others by shared positivity, mutual care, and concern. Activities such as playing with children, spending time with people whom we care about (Otero et al. 2019).

4. Mindfulness and Savoring: We allow ourselves to immerse ourselves in the sweet feeling of positive emotions like joy, love, gratitude, and serenity. (Kiken, Lundberg, and Fredrickson 2017).

5.3. POSITIVE BEHAVIOR:

Positive behavior can be described as the activities of the individuals which create a positive environment in and around. The application of character strengths induces positive functioning in everyday life. It leads to expressing compassion, love, and kindness to all. Move to engage with altruistic behavior and to create positive relationships with humanity. Our life is not a solitary one, all that we experience in joys and sorrows revolve around others. Making such positive relationships become an element of our well-being (M. E. P. Seligman 2012). Strength-based life enhances the individual to count the blessings of life and to be more grateful towards life. These meaningful activities increase endurance towards the hardships of life and to find hope in life.

Application of character strengths in daily life: Human character strengths are identified by the exploration across various groups of people, religion, culture, and nation and classified by Peterson and Seligman into six broad categories of virtues and 24 strengths that are valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers throughout time. Character strengths are specific and core characteristics about our personality, traits like that they manifest across situations and time and are associated with good life outcomes. It shapes our life experiences. Ryan Niemiec, who is an expert in studying the application of character strengths, has examined the many roles of character strength and has explained six functions or purposeful roles in adversities that character strengths serve as better sources and coping in life. He states that character strengths offer an active role in catalyzing, growing, and appreciating the positives and opportunities in life, as well as buffering, re-interpreting, managing, and transforming the adversities and problems of life. (Niemiec 2020)

The priming function: character strengths used as preparation for strengths awareness and use.

The mindfulness function: character strengths serving in synergy with mindful awareness of the present reality.

The appreciation function: character strengths used in the expression of value for what has occurred.

The buffering function: character strengths used in the prevention of problems.

The reappraisal function: character strengths serving to explain and/or reinterpret the complex dynamics of problems.

The resilience function: character strengths used in bouncing back from life setbacks or problems.

Source: From the article, Ryan M. Niemiec, Six Functions of Character Strengths for Thriving at Times of Adversity and Opportunity: A Theoretical Perspective

Tayyab Rashid, who introduced positive psychotherapy, has created a list of activities to apply character strength in everyday life. In a recent article, he listed 101 strength-based actions to enhance well-being to cope up with the COVID 19 (Rashid, T., & McGrath, R. E. 2020). It states that using character strengths is a useful way to respond to the fear and stress caused by a pandemic. Therefore, applying our character strengths creatively in our everyday activities enhance our psychological immunity and well-being.

6. Summary:

Human history has met many adverse unfavorable conditions, calamity, and distress circumstances. Among that, the spread of epidemic diseases, outbreaks of pandemics now and then threaten our humanity, yet humanity survives with courage and can prepare for danger and threatful situations. Positive psychological adaptation and the strengths inherent in humankind help them to adapt to stressful and risky situations, especially with these effects of COVID 19. Amidst the loss of life, bereavements, struggles for daily needs, economic imbalance, and uncertainty about the future, individuals will not be able to think immediately about the good life and the possibilities. But our innate resilient power, positive potentials, character strengths, and the mental health support offered from the various sources helps each one of us to strengthen our hope and trust. It helps to maintain and preserve our well-being and mental health at difficult times in our life. So, the science of positive psychology and its contribution has a vital role in strengthening our positive psychological immune system towards the minor hassles of daily life to crucial stressful life situations.

7. Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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