

DOES THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARACTER STRENGTH OF RESILIENCY
AFFECT OUR RESPONSE TO GRIEF AND LOSS?

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

Does the development of the character strength of resiliency affect our response to loss
and grief?

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Can the application of Positive psychology be influential in developing character strengths such as resiliency and courage? Will the development and cultivation of resiliency from childhood influence our future response and affect our coping to grief and loss? How are we able to find meaning and gratitude in the midst of significant loss?

Educational styles, parenting styles, defense mechanisms, character strengths, bereavement, and adaptation and acceptance of loss will be explored. Historical and contemporary theories about grief and loss will be examined. Courage, resiliency and perseverance will be surveyed through the lens of applied psychology, with a focus not only on the psychology of coping and grief but also how it is viewed in current culture through the medium of the arts, such as literature and media.

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Introduction

The intent of this paper is to

1. Consider the role of positive psychology and how developing character strengths such as resiliency and courage can lead to an overall increased satisfaction with life.
2. Review how the strengths of resiliency and courage can create post traumatic growth and how it can be beneficial in assisting with adaptation after loss.
3. Explain what character strengths are and why focusing on their development can lead to a happier and more productive life.
4. Help to understand how grief should be viewed as a normal part of life and that the labeling of grief as dysfunctional or complicated could be viewed as counterproductive to assisting individuals in coping with their grief.

The following terms have been defined as follows:

Bereavement: the loss of a loved one through death (Parkes et al, 1998). The objective situation of having lost something or someone significant (Jakoby, 2012).

Coping: Coping relates to processes or strategies of managing the situation in which bereavement places the individual (Jakoby, 2012).

Grief: a normal emotional response to the loss of a significant other (Jakoby, 2012).

Loss: Being deprived of something invested with emotional energy by the self (Greally, 2012)

What is Positive Psychology?

Ever since Gable and Haidt introduced their theories and pivotal research that contributed to the development of the movement of positive psychology there has been a significant increase in research focusing on the character strengths of resiliency and courage. The ability of some to sustain loss and have a traumatic growth with flourishing after that loss and subsequent grief demonstrates that courage and resiliency are character strengths that are not yet completely understood and require further study.

Recent research that aims to move away from the historically entrenched theories of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who originally proposed the five stage grief theory has resulted in more examination aimed at viewing adaptation to loss and grief from a strengths based perspective. In order to develop effective support for grieving individuals, emphasis and attention should be placed on those who adapt and grow after loss as a method of understanding why acceptance and adjustment is easier for some bereaved individuals but is more of a challenge for others.

Gable and Haidt wrote that they believed “In the second half of the 20th century, psychology learned much about depression, racism, violence, self-esteem management, irrationality, and growing up under adversity but it had much less to say about character strengths, virtues, and the conditions that lead to high levels of happiness or civic engagement (Gable & Haidt, 2005).” Their statement expressed the view that psychology was on a negative trajectory and they were highlighting the fact that it was now time to view psychology from a different point of reference. They believed that the acorn planted in 1880 by Wilhem Wundt that had served as a starting point for the science of psychology and had continued to grow throughout the 1900’s was now in need

of a new and more enlightened perspective. Within the 1900's there had developed multiple fields of study within psychology. These included Psychoanalysis, Behaviorism, Humanistic, Cognitive, Psycholinguistics, Evolutionary, and Cultural psychology. The commonalities of these fields were, that with few exceptions they all focused on understanding diseases and dysfunctions. By the end of the century and with the encroachment of an exciting new millennium, support formed within the field of psychology for an enhanced awareness and understanding into an innovative area of psychological research which later was to become known as "Positive Psychology".

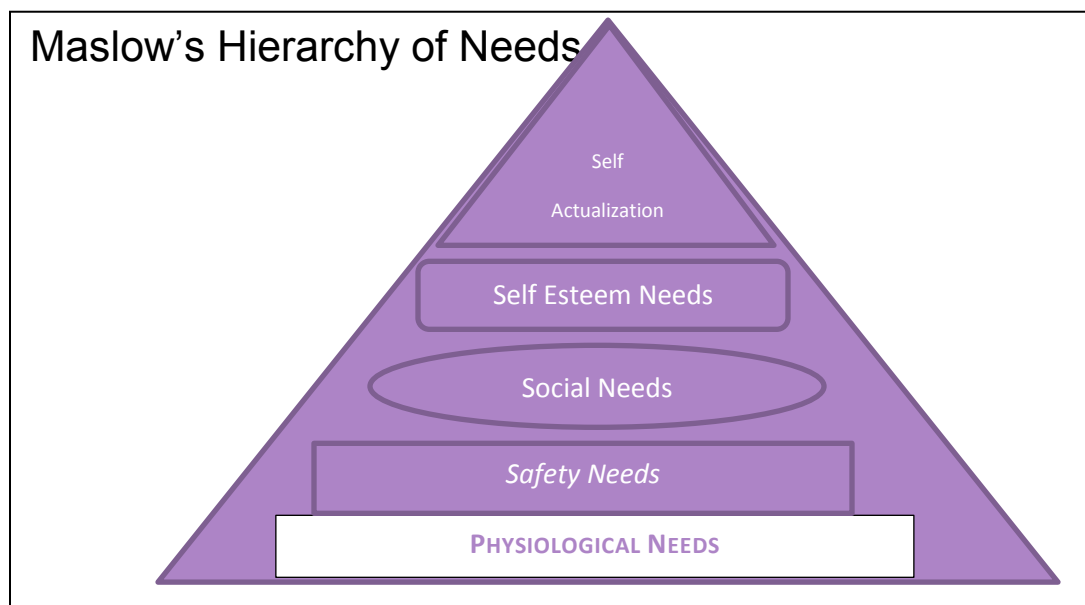
Positive psychology has since developed into multiple branches projecting psychology that had the initial form of a sturdy trunk into a fast growing tree with theories that are spreading in a variety of directions. A significant amount of positive psychology research originated from the inspired theories proposed by psychologists such as Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, Richard Ryan, Robert Biswas-Diener, Sonia Lyubomirsky and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. These contributions included theories that encompassed ideas such as PERMA, the Philosophy of Happiness, Self-determination Theory, and Flow,

In a similar manner to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is in the field of humanistic psychology, the innovators of positive psychology mirrored the hierarchy of needs. Maslow's theory proposed that people should have their basic needs such as food, water, and shelter met before they could progress to the higher stages of his hierarchy. His theory which was proposed in nineteen forty three proposed that it isn't until the final level of self-actualization is reached that we can feel completed and fulfilled. It is when we have developed and maximized our potential that we are fully accomplished and can

find satisfaction, feel harmony, and experience feelings of totality. In order for us to take this final step and to evolve to a higher level, one must strive to fulfill one's individual potential by accomplishing the optimization of individual personal growth and potential. This requires the fulfillment of one's own talent and capabilities and includes being able to recognize that everyone else also has the same potential.

Maslow was somewhat of a maverick for his time period because from its very beginning, the roots of psychology had been focused on understanding dysfunctions, diseases and disorders. The tenets of psychology were created around developing an understanding of human behavior and drives. Maslow's interest in humanistic psychology and his hierarchy of needs was an early positive psychology theory.

The below figure provides an overview of the well-known hierarchy that was proposed by Maslow.



From A Theory of Human Motivation, 1943 Abraham H. Maslow.

It is very much a part of human nature to be curious about, and to want to understand why something occurred, why somebody behaves in a certain way, and why we respond in a certain way. We strive to understand behavior but it is also our natural evolutionary tendency to focus on negative outcomes. The rationale for this is that from an evolutionary perspective it is being done in our best interest because it is done in order to plan for, or, to avoid threats and it is also a way to understand potential dangers as a means to survive. “We are much more able to discern our “potential threats more readily than potential rewards” (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Recognizing threats is an adaptive response but in the long term it may encumber us because often our natural focus will habitually continue to remain on the negative plane. This may lead to the continuation and belief that life should be viewed in a pessimistic way.

Psychology has had its own struggles with ill-advised experiments and immoral execution of research that had potential. Transgressions and ethical infractions are not specific only to the medical model. Within the medical field they have included the Tuskegee experiments, the Willowbrook State School experiments, the use of Lobotomies, and the lack of consent to use Henrietta Lacks cancer cells for research. (Resnick, 2017). For the discreditable moments of psychology they have included some events that occurred in the field of experimental psychology. These include Stanley Milgram's studies of obedience in nineteen sixty six when “Participants were exposed to extremely stressful situations that may have the potential to cause psychological harm.”(McLoed et al, 2007), and the Stanford prison experiment in nineteen seventy one which studied responses to the authority of prisoners and guards and how a power differential altered personality and responses. The study was ethically questionable as it

did not permit participants to leave the experiment when they requested to do so. From these dark days of experimental psychology there has arisen a new ethical foundation that was built on failures. As Albert Einstein stated “Failure is success in progress”.

Since the field of positive psychology has now obtained the spotlight, it is progressing and focusing on the variety of ways that people can be educated to become more self-actualized. In this way positive psychology has adapted itself and has moved since the new millennium from being a fledgling science which sought to understand the psychology of the science and behavior of the mind to “a study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Positive psychology is a methodology that is supportive of and focuses on the many areas that contribute to accelerating our self-knowledge about our own abilities in order to flourish and achieve life satisfaction.

How can the advent of positive psychology be beneficial or useful for those of us who have or will experience loss, bereavement, and the subsequent grief? Can positive psychology assist us to respond in a healthy and adaptive way to these events while we are experiencing them? The reality of being alive is that despite our own hopes, we will all have to face our own mortality and eventually the relationships that we value will change and end. What can we do now to help prepare for this eventuality and what can we do to prepare ourselves for when we reach the end of our own lifetime? Will we have enough time to prepare and be ready to die on our own terms when the time arrives? Will we have had the courage to have had the conversations with those we love? After all, “Mortality can be a treacherous subject” (Gawande, 2014). It can also be a highly uncomfortable subject for many of us to discuss and understand.

Vital Statistics

“Death is Normal. Death may be the enemy but it is also the natural order to things” (Gawande, 2014). The words of Atual Gawande speak to a truth that declares that death is not a mystery or an uncertain event but a rite of passage that we all will come to experience. It is as much a rite of passage as a bar mitzvah, confirmation, baptism, wedding, or, anniversary event. The psychological need to self- protect and avoid, deny and maintain that death will not affect us is a cognitive dissonance that creates a fallacy as to our own and our loved ones immortality. It does us a great disservice because our failure to view death as normal does not assist us to psychologically prepare for death.

According to data from the National Vital statistics system, the average mortality rate within the United States was 78.8 years in 2015 (Jiaquan et al, 2016). Within this report there is the provision of medical and demographic data that explains the most common cause of deaths based on the information that is supplied on death certificates that are reported to National Vital Statistics. Life expectancy for women in 2015 remains higher than that of males. There was also no reported change in the top ten leading causes of deaths from 2014 to 2015.

The numbers indicate that for the majority of us we will have time to prepare for our deaths as chronic disease has become more treatable and longevity has increased. “In America in 1790, people aged sixty five or older constituted less than two percent of the population, today there are fourteen percent” (Gawande, 2014). Our future manner of deaths are reported according to the recently updated International Classification Diagnosis 10 system and are categorized as follows;

Causes of Death	2015
Heart Disease	168.5
Cancer	41.6
Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases	41.6
Unintentional Injuries	43.2
Stroke	37.6
Alzheimer's Disease	29.4
Diabetes	21.3
Influenza and Pneumonia	15.2
Kidney Disease	13.4
Suicide	13.3

It has been theorized that how we will ultimately learn how to cope with loss and grief is based on the influences from our childhood, however, there are many considerations when determining how we will face our own mortality and how we will react to loss. Does the attachment style or the parenting style influence that we encountered as children influence our response to bereavement? Does the educational support and experiences that we had as children influence our ability to grieve in a healthy way, or, will we be labeled as suffering from prolonged grief, inhibited grief, delayed grief, or, chronic grief?

Attachment Types, Parenting Styles, Education and Child Development.

As we reach adulthood and accomplish our developmental milestones we have been shaped by a multitude of factors that have influenced and conditioned us in a way that may later become difficult to change, however, we are all imbued with neuroplasticity and can adapt to new challenges and situations when given the tools to do so. Since our behaviors and values are shaped by those with whom we have the most contact with such as our parents, peers, family members, or, mentors, how can they assist us and provide support in order to increase our adaptability and willingness to learn and grow? How do we retain an adaptive and helpful growth mind set versus an inflexible and fixed mindset?

From a young age our parents and educators are generally the individuals who will shape our future because we share the most time with them and model our behavior after them. For those who are home schooled, it is predominantly the family that takes center stage in influencing the direction and values a child's beliefs, values, and world view, however, as children we are frequently protected from understanding death and the rituals that are associated with it.

Diana Baumrind was a pivotal researcher in the 1960's and she developed theories governing differences in parenting styles and how they could potentially contribute to and influence a child's development. As a psychologist she conducted experiments with parents in an attempt to identify and understand how different parenting styles influenced future behavior and character as well how it may impact their future coping abilities as adults. Further research demonstrated that "early conduct problems

are precursors of later adjustment including crime, mental health, substance use and sexual behaviour but are not directly related to later educational or occupational outcomes” (Fergusson et al, 2005).

The original parenting styles that were identified by Diana Baumrind were Authoritarian, Authoritative and Permissive (Baumrind, 1966). Since her study the additional category of neglectful parenting has been added. Currently we are also aware of the culturally defined style known as “helicopter” parenting but for our purposes parenting styles are now categorized as falling within four classifications and are defined broadly as follows:

1. Authoritarian – Children are taught obedience through threat or act of punishment which may result in low self-esteem, being fearful and having social difficulty, viewing compliance and obedience as loving.
2. Authoritative – these parents have expectations for their children and will explain rationales for decision making in their parenting.
3. Permissive – indulgent parenting that results in a lack of structure or consequences for the child. It may result in poor self-regulation and self-control.
4. Neglectful or Uninvolved – Children develop distrust because their needs are not being met by their absent or negative parent and they will often have increased difficulty forming relationships as a result. (Baumrind, 1966)

Each parenting style can influence a child’s future outlook specifically their beliefs about permanence and pessimism. According to Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*, “People who make permanent and universal explanations for good events as well as temporary and specific explanations for bad events, bounce back from troubles briskly and get on a roll easily when they succeed once” (Seligman, 2006). He also submits that “People who make temporary and specific explanations for success, and permanent and universal explanations for setbacks, tend to collapse under pressure – both

for a long time and across situations –and rarely get on a roll” (Seligman 2006). At the core of this statement is that we are either able to dispute the negative and pessimistic thoughts that enter and create our inner dialogue, or, we cannot. Resiliency develops from optimistic beliefs and being able to overcome challenges and adapting to new situations and circumstances. Resiliency develops by banishing those critical thoughts and self-criticisms which create a self-defeating and negative mindset. In order to be successful, one must be able to deconstruct the negative thoughts that serve to sabotage our will and desires. How can this knowledge about permanence and pessimism influence our responses to grief when we are children?

While there are many considerations in the development of personality and character and parental influence is a strong influence that contributes to a child’s development, there was a research study performed by Ellis & Lloyd, entitled *The Long Term impact of early parental death*, that focused on the consequences and impact that a parents death had on children. The study involved children for whom the death of a parent occurred before the age of eighteen. When the narratives that had been provided by those interviewed were reviewed, it showed that there were many individual narratives that described an adult’s recall and reflections as to the impact that a parent’s death had on their childhood and that it frequently continued to be impactful from that point forward into adulthood.

The death of a parent would often result in feelings of isolation and confusion and there would often be a sudden lack of social support. It also determined that the parental role of the surviving parent was altered or diminished and this too was significantly impactful on the grieving child. The results were such that “Our analysis further suggests

that when children experienced a progression of discontinues events (or continuity that did not meet their need) respondents appear to be more likely to experience emotional difficulties and feeling of insecurity and loneliness in adult life” (Ellis & Lloyd, 2013). What they discovered was that support and guidance to children was inadequate and that it had far reaching consequences into their worldview as adults. The recommendations were that “Guidelines for bereaved children be followed in order to mitigate future negative consequences” (Ellis & Lloyd, 2013).

These guidelines included providing support to the remaining parent as well as the child so that they understood the importance of their role as the surviving parent. This was recommended because “The findings suggest that it is crucial for such guidelines to be followed if the damage and suffering experienced by individuals in adult life is to be minimized.” (Ellis & Lloyd, 2013). There are many consequences to how contemporary life has changed and how when there are no longer multi-generational families living in one household it decreases exposure to and awareness of death. Death is no longer viewed as the natural progression of life but it is viewed more remotely and passively. Individuals are now more likely to die in a medical facility than they are to die at home surrounded by their families. Proximity to death has changed and with that so has the ability to acknowledge its presence. Responsiveness to childhood grief, parenting styles, and avoidance of the development of conduct disorders are factors that carry importance in childhood. The development of a conduct disorder “appears to reflect a robust developmental relationship between middle childhood and later life” (Fergusson et al, 2005).

Post Traumatic Growth and Resiliency

Tom Hanks has a knack for starring in movies that mark the quiet hero's journey. His characters will frequently embody stories about an individual's courage and resiliency in overcoming difficult conditions and adverse situations. His demonstration of the character strength of resiliency and courage have been featured in the movies Philadelphia, Apollo 13, Forrest Gump, Saving Private Ryan, Captain Phillips and most recently, the movie Sully. His portrayal of the hero character overcoming multiple challenges is often inspirational and uplifting. To the viewer he is the face of courage because he overcomes numerous trials and tribulations but is able to keep on persevering in spite of all of the traumas and challenges that he encounters and suffers through. How does trauma alter the character's outlook? In the movies, it appears to be less than impactful because his character often returns to the bonhomie and jovial person that he was at the beginning of the movie. Does that movie portrayal translate realistically to the real world?

When a traumatic event occurs such as with the death of a loved one, it can result in "changes in the view of the self and the world involving their deeper understanding and making sense out of what happened" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Post traumatic growth can be a positive shift "as an individual experiences a trauma, has an increased self-perception and appreciation of life" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). When we are instilled with resiliency and courage and we have the ability to be adaptive then it can alter our world view. It can also change our relationships with others and our "appreciation of life" (Bulik, 2015).

In order to manage grief then we have to adopt adaptive coping strategies. Our cognitive reordering and rebuilding after loss can also be due to other life changing events. In Susan Berger's "The five ways we grieve" she explains that grief is impactful upon our lives in a variety of ways. These are categorized as "losses" and can occur as relationship losses, developmental losses, loss of treasured objects and also loss of "some aspect of self" (Berger, 2011). The loss of a spouse, children moving out, the loss of your home due to a disaster or the loss of the ability to define oneself such as no longer being a mother, daughter, son, father, etc. are all a form of loss.

Loss can result in a complex transformation when previous assumptions about ourselves become changed forever. "Gradually and over time their identity is revised by a combination of shift in how they see the world, how they see themselves, what they determine is important in life, and how they create meaning from their loss" (Berger, 2011). There is not only an alteration in their global world view but also a change in their viewpoint about their own individual identity. Adaptation becomes a necessity as loss of identity and role can persist with grief. In the Tom Hanks movie version, his losses are mitigated because of his character strengths and his abilities to be adaptive in a variety of challenging situations. It is his grit and perseverance that keeps us enthralled stimulating our vagus nerves and eliciting a sympathetic and compassionate response to his difficulties. How does one develop the character strengths that are portrayed by his movie characters? In order to develop a strength one must first understand what it is that motivates us and what our key strengths are.

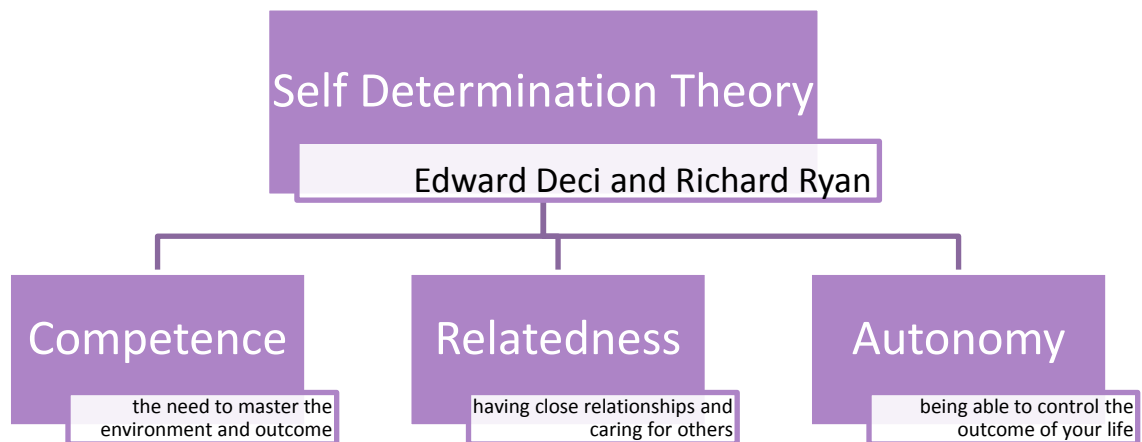
Self Determination Theory

What is that makes us want to excel and exceed beyond our own expectations? How can we reach these far reaching goals that require us to be inquisitive, energetic, and self-motivated? In the midst of achievements and accomplishments, how will this striving for self-improvement impact future responses to loss and how will it impact our identity and our world view? Will we continue to be motivated despite obstacles placed in front of us and do we have enough motivation to overcome those obstacles?

In order not to succumb to permanence and pessimism, the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be understood. What is it that contributes to our drive and motivates us to force ourselves forward past impediments? For an understanding of this we should review Self-Determination Theory.

Self Determination Theory was proposed by Deci and Ryan and it examines how human motivation and personality could be influential in behavioral self- regulation. According to its theory, people have three basic psychological needs and they are competence, relatedness and autonomy. In their study Ryan and Deci “assumed that humans have an inclination toward activity and integration, but also have a vulnerability to passivity” (Ryan & Deci , 2000)

Competency means that we are interested in knowing what the results of our efforts and actions are while relatedness deals with our sense of belonging. Autonomy is that events occur as a result of our actions which we purposefully select and the accomplishment which results nurtures our sense of self.



Ryan and Deci proposed that human nature can be “either active or passive, constructive or indolent” and that these are based not only on biological reasons but also social constructs” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). They demonstrated that “intrinsic motivation was more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a sense of security and relatedness. (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and that “the basic needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness must be satisfied across the life span for an individual to experience an ongoing sense of well-being or Eudaimonia” (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In order for us to thrive psychologically then we need to achieve, internalize, and integrate these motivations. Extrinsic motivation is not successful because the offer of external rewards such as money or the threat of punishment also decreases our intrinsic motivation over time. It is better to have the ability to develop and sustain internal intrinsic motivation because it is “Organismic to think about people as living entities” as opposed to “machines” who will thrive when performing tasks willingly (Deci, 2017). Autonomy and being in control of our own behaviors and lives is what pushes us. It is not when we are being controlled by the needs and demands of others that results in our

engagement with the action but it is when we are intrinsically motivated to feel engaged with the task and are invested in the outcome that we achieve intrinsic motivation.

Ryan and Deci discovered that “conditions supportive of autonomy and competence reliably facilitated this vital expression of the human growth tendency, whereas conditions that controlled behavior and hindered perceived effectance undermined its expression” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The former section is consistent with the parenting styles of the authoritative parent while the latter matches with the authoritarian. It is more beneficial to have had authoritative parents who helped to develop strong intrinsic motivation through internalization and integration.

What do you do and how do you go about developing this ability if you have not had the good fortune to have had this type of supportive background? In order to be able to identify opportunities for growth and overcome self-limiting behaviors it is important to have knowledge, insight, and an understanding of your own personal character strengths.

Understanding Character Strengths

Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman published the groundbreaking manual called “*Character Strengths and Virtues, A Handbook and Classification*” in 2004. This handbook identifies twenty-four universal character strengths and the six virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

In order to understand personal character strengths, what they are, and how they contribute to our propensity for adaptation and resiliency we will review them within the original context from the handbook, *VIA classification of character strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Since we all have individualized core strengths it is important to remember that we all have the ability to continue to develop our strengths as well as our areas of less strength because “strengths are not fixed traits” (Biswas-Deiner et al, 2011). An examination of your character strengths is helpful in developing self-awareness and insight into where future energy could be deployed to develop additional strengths or reinforce those already in place. In order to assess your own signature character strengths you may access the website at

<https://www.viacharacter.org/survey/account/register>

The Values In Action questionnaire can be used as a tool to improve your own life satisfaction and realize your own potential.

“1. Wisdom and Knowledge – Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- ✓ **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it

- ✓ **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
- ✓ **Judgment** [critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
- ✓ **Love of Learning:** Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
- ✓ **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people (Seligman, 2004)

2. Courage – Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- ✓ **Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
- ✓ **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks

- ✓ **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
- ✓ **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. Humanity - Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- ✓ **Love**: Having and valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
- ✓ **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
- ✓ **Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

4. Justice - Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- ✓ **Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
- ✓ **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

- ✓ **Leadership:** Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done, and at the same time maintaining good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

5. Temperance- Strengths that protect against excess

- ✓ **Forgiveness:** Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
- ✓ **Humility:** Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
- ✓ **Prudence:** Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- ✓ **Self-Regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

6. Transcendence - Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- ✓ **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
- ✓ **Gratitude:** Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
- ✓ **Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

- ✓ **Humor** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

Spirituality [faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort “(VIA classification of character strengths and Virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

A strengths based perspective means that instead of focusing on areas in need of improvement you examine and use your top character strengths instead. For some people they are fortunate in that they are resilient and have the ability to overcome challenges in their lives but we are frequently shaped by other factors beyond our control. Grief, loss, trauma are all components that can contribute to lacking a belief in oneself and forming a permanently pessimistic outlook.

Understanding Loss, Grief and Bereavement

Much interest has taken place recently in opening up the conversation around death and dying. This can be viewed through increased media exposure to the topic and the mainstream exposure given to documentaries such as *Being Mortal*, *Extremis* and *Prison Terminal*. The current public awareness program, *The Conversation Project*, is yet another starting point and method to increase awareness of the need to have conversations about what our personal preferences are for medical treatment and to ensure that it is shared with our loved ones who may have to make critical medical decisions on our behalf. Their tagline on their website, theconversationproject.org is “when it comes to end of life care, one conversation can make all the difference” (conversationproject, 2017). It encourages us not to shy away from having difficult conversations but to use current events and situations as way to jump start the discussions that rarely take place amongst families prior to it becoming a necessity.

This project marks an attempt to shift from the death denying culture that currently predominates. Additional literature breaking through over the years has included the writings of authors such as Mitch Albion and his *Life with Morrie* to Joan Didion's, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Other authors who have written about their own mortality during the end of their life and while facing their own deaths have included Dr. Oliver Sacks in his writings entitled, *Gratitude* and Dr. Randy Pauvich in his book, *The Last Lecture*.

Atul Gawandes book, *Being Mortal*, challenges us to shift our thinking from the idea that while life is precious it does not mean that it should be maintained at all costs. The change to open dialog is encouraged in order to embrace a philosophy that as a culture we should recognize that death is ever present and that it is a consequence of living, however, it remains minimally discussed, however, it has been shown that “shared acknowledgement of the death’s reality and experience of loss among family members help coping with the loss” (Jakoby, 2012).

Theories of Bereavement and Grief

Since Elizabeth Kubler- Ross's pivotal work in understanding grief, there have been additional advancements that expand her body of work focusing on understanding grief and loss and there has been a ground swell of support to disregard the stage based theories of Kubler-Ross and other theories that deal with our emotional responses to grief and loss. Grief is a unique experience and theories about grief and bereavement can assist to increase an individual's self- awareness that their trajectory is a combination of the many theories about how people deal with the death of a loved one. A person's grief response is also shaped by the characteristics of their personality, strengths, past experiences, culture and gender.

All of the early theories governing grief positioned it as being a negative life event that had emotional responses that occurred in a linear way moving from one stage to the next. Kubler-Ross in her later research indicated that the stages of grief could cross over with one another and that they were not necessarily orderly but there remained an unintended negative consequence from her research. For individuals who did not follow the stages during the time of bereavement were left believing that they were in some way an abnormality or outlier. This was because their individual grief response was not the expected response. The idea that grief could persist beyond the average expected length of time meant that it was labeled "complicated grief" and viewed as a dysfunction of grief. If grief wasn't wrapped up in a neat little parcel so that it could be sent away in a timely manner, it would culminate in the tenacious belief that grief was unresolved and would then be viewed as an abnormality. Instead of showing the

individuality of the grief response, it has historically been placed into a collective expectation for recovery as is often seen with a disease model arising to the belief that grief is diagnostically similar to the flu or measles.

“Letting go and moving on” seem to be some of the key words used to showing a person as having a “healthy” response to loss, however, why do they have to be mutually exclusive? Can we not hold on the identity that we had when the person was alive and the memories of the time spent with them without being considered “dwelling” or suffering a pathological response to grief.

How Does Resiliency Influence Grief?

The idea of resiliency can be applied not only to people but also to less animate objects. We may view a block of wood when it is formed into our kitchen counter as being resilient because it shows little damage despite the pounding that it receives while you are prepping your chicken breasts for your meal. It withstands a repeated and protracted attack using weapons that are designed to destroy and assault it. In this instance it is the tenderizer mallet and the object, the dead chicken, is the inanimate object. Unfortunately while the chicken will be better with more tenderizing with time and repetition the kitchen counter will eventually show signs of damage and wear.

Over time we have the expectation that repeated losses will also diminish an individual as it does the kitchen counter, however, in the cinematic Tom Hanks world that does not appear to become the case and although life is not movies in this instance, it does appear to have kernels of truth.

From a post traumatic growth perspective, adaptation takes place and we adjust to the new terms that we find ourselves living under. With this knowledge, how do we build towards self-actualization? We can do so by following the guidance that has been provided for us from the PERMA Model proposed by Martin Seligman.

PERMA: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement

Seligman proposed in his theoretical model of Happiness that in order to live a complete and flourishing life then we ought to understand the “five core elements of psychological well-being and happiness” (Seligman, 2002). His research provoked and challenged us to view positive emotions with more respect and to sharpen our focus. We had to refocus in order to study those elements that would engender us to lead a life that is filled with happiness and more satisfaction. While the term happiness itself can be viewed by the cynic as a very optimistic term, that challenge is the first part of the suggestion for following the PERMA model. In order for us to adopt a more positive mindset then we should begin by focusing on these suggestions for improving our overall life satisfaction.

Positive Emotion

Seeing that the glass is half full or half empty is a well-known way to determine if the person that you are speaking with has an optimistic or a pessimistic outlook. While pessimism serves a purpose such as in survival strategy and planning for negative outcomes, those who are optimistic are more likely to live a fulfilling life. By viewing the half full glass in an optimistic way and reframing your negative thoughts to the fact that with a half full glass then you still have the opportunity to fill your glass with happiness then you are viewing the future in a positive way.

Engagement

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced the idea of flow in his book “The Psychology of Optimal Experience”. The experience of flow is that when we are fully engaged and experiencing enjoyment of what it is that we are doing then we lose track of time because our focus is increased. Flow usually has a creative element to it and it causes us to have feelings of fulfillment and enjoyment with what it is that we are creating or working on at that moment. In time we become completely absorbed and engaged and are also challenging ourselves. According to Seligman’s PERMA model, engagement with life will nurture and advance our own personal happiness.

Relationships

The ability to form Relationships and maintain social connections are very important features of human interactions. Individuals are able to grow and flourish when they have durable social connections and are able to experience love and intimacy. When strong positive relationships are nourished and become successful it has been shown to improve overall life satisfaction.

Meaning

Meaning is important as we all have to believe that we serve a function for our presence on this earth. It is purpose that provides us with happiness and the sense of fulfillment. Meaning is not a materialistic pursuit but it is the reason for living and for being present with ourselves and with others. The long term study from Harvard that followed men from the 1940’s showed that fulfillment is not measured by money or by

material gain as we believe it to be when we are in our twenties but by the relationships that we have with others (Lincoln et al, 2012)

Accomplishments

Feeling accomplished requires us to pursue and fulfill goals that we set for ourselves. Making sure that effort is placed in order to accomplish and end goal is a satisfying event. It is by setting goals that are achievable but challenging that we are able to feel a sense of accomplishment. Accomplishment is a way to assist us to flourish in our lives along with the other components of PERMA.

Conclusion

There remains a strong argument that current approaches and beliefs about bereavement and grief responses are understudied. Additional research to determine if a strengths based approach would be helpful in supporting individual reaction during bereavement and grief should be considered. Having open discussions regarding a person's grief response may be more effective without placing any expectations on them as to how their grief should be proceeding. The character strengths of an individual may also have a significant impact on how bereavement counseling should be conducted. For counselors who work with the bereaved altering their own view about normal versus dysfunctional or complicated grief would assist individuals who may become stigmatized by their own persistent grief.

A newer model that has been suggested theorizes that there is a dual model of grief. It proposes that "First, grief includes a reaction to the specific loss in terms of an active response of separation distress (e.g., searching, yearning) (Jakoby, 2012).

"Second, grief refers to the deprivation of latent functions of the lost relationship. The latter is constituted by a passive response in terms of depression or sadness (Jakoby, 2012)". The lost identity which has to be reorganized and rebuilt after loss is underscored in the dual model.

From a strengths based perspective "resilient people tended to experience their support network as more willing to listen to their concerns, had a greater willingness to rely on others when needed, and reported less worry about the availability of close others and lower levels of loneliness" (Mancini, 2015).

If there is to be hope for the future when it comes to understanding our own grief and expectations about life satisfaction we should let the longest running study by Harvard on Adult Development be our guide. It should be that having difficulties as a child fades over time as long as achieving satisfaction with life is accomplished. Having purpose and meaning are more important to us and achieving an education such as going to college was found to be a more important factor than money or social status in determining our overall lifetime success and satisfaction.

Success can be a measure of overcoming challenges that are a part of life's procession for most people. There are very few people who live a charmed life without encountering any loss or challenge that requires solidification of personal character in order to transcend through it. In the words of George Bonanno "It's hard to tell what makes people resilient. Personality probably predicts only about 10% of resilience. Having money helps, having social support helps, having minimal sources of other stress helps, but no one thing is a big predictor." (Time, 2017)

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