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Recovering Happiness

Life is an 80-year stumble over boulders. You are guaranteed plenty of bad days, and a few awful ones.

Sometimes macro events are sufficiently horrible – I am thinking of the Asian earthquake and its casualties – that it is natural to wonder how humans cope with life after extremes of unhappiness. Can they? Encouragingly, the research evidence is that people are surprisingly good at surviving the blackest of black. I do not say this to play down the painfulness of life's shocks. Tragedy is real, as we have seen, and unfortunately will again.

Rather, one week after the Tsunami that killed so many, it may be worth reminding ourselves of a positive side of the human animal. The data show that people do reclaim happiness from despair.

If you wish to see one of the best new scientific studies of this, go to Google and type in Leads and Lags in Life Satisfaction, which is a research paper by the Parisian economist Andrew Clark. Working with colleagues, Clark's paper tracks the psychological wellbeing of many thousands of individuals over a period of fourteen years. The researchers do something simple but highly effective. Their human subjects' life satisfaction levels are averaged on to graphs, and then plotted out over the years before and after big life events. I found the resulting charts to be among the most fascinating I have seen in my career.

To get a feel for adaptation, let's start with a nice event. Marriage.

About three years before someone marries, they start reporting higher satisfaction with life. Mental wellbeing levels then rise steadily each year and reach a peak in the year of marriage itself. The graph looks like the left-hand side of a mountain side. However, for both men and women, happiness thereupon starts to fall. One year after

marriage, people report lower happiness scores (of course, this is only on average). Happiness declines a bit more in the second year after getting married. And so on. About four years into wedlock, happiness graphs start to run flat each year. Encouragingly, this flattening takes place at a higher level of reported happiness than at which most folk started, as singletons, but the early blissful years of marriage are gone for ever. People have adapted, you might say.

Having a child is another big life event. The Clark research group demonstrates that happiness among parents begins to improve about two years before the birth of the baby. But after the baby arrives, life satisfaction scores plummet, for men and women, to slightly below their starting point. Babies do not make you feel happier -- for long.

Unemployment, divorce and widowhood are severe life events. Again, we see a lot of adaptation.

The evidence on psychological wellbeing after widowhood seems particularly important (partly because, sad to say, most of us will go through some version of it). We have been studying this longitudinally, using randomly selected Britons, in new Warwick research. As might be expected, if your partner dies you suffer immediately and intensely. Indeed, the rise in psychological strain from bereavement is the largest we ever see from any life events. And it is almost identical in intensity for bereaved men and bereaved women.

Yet, even here, there is good news. Our work finds that psychological recovery is powerful. By two years after widowhood, mental wellbeing has gone back up to the point it was at two years before the point of widowhood.

Pretty obviously, such research cannot banish unhappiness. But I, for one, view the findings as containing an encouraging message. Human beings stride back from the dark.