

Resilience

Exercise

10-15 min

Client

No



Benefit Finding

Helgeson and colleagues (2006) defined benefit finding as “the positive effects that result from a traumatic event” (p. 797). It is the process of deriving growth from adversity, and it has become a central construct in the evolution of positive psychology. Clients can report major positive changes as a result of challenging life events, such as severe illness or trauma.

In general, research has revealed positive long-term effects of benefit finding. For instance, some individuals report a new appreciation of their own strength and resilience, an enhanced sense of purpose, greater spirituality, closer ties with others, and changes in life priorities. Others feel that their relationships are stronger and that they have become more compassionate or altruistic (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis et al., 1998; McMillen et al., 1997).

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to create awareness of the possible benefits of challenging life events. This explicit focus on the positive characteristics of negative life events can help boost resilience.



Advice

- In this exercise, the participant will be asked to recall a traumatic life event. Be extra attentive to the participant during the exercise. For most clients, thinking of a difficult event will trigger negative thoughts and/or feelings.
- Make sure to acknowledge the painful experience. If the practitioner proceeds to the positive aspects of the event too early, the client may feel that he/she is not being understood or that the severity of the event is being underestimated. Consequently, the willingness to look at the event from another perspective is likely to be reduced.
- Considering life events from different viewpoints is one way to reduce dichotomous (black and white) thinking. The aim of this exercise is to create a balanced perspective on negative life events rather than to stimulate positive thinking. Even when positive thinking is used to avoid negative feelings that accompany the traumatic life event, it can be considered a form of experiential avoidance, and it should be discouraged. It is important to inform clients about this distinction.
- In general, the exercise works best when the event that is chosen lies far enough in the past to allow time for the individual to also consider positive aspects, like personal

growth, renewed friendship, and so on. When the chosen event occurred very recently, it can be very difficult, if not impossible, for a client to address its positive aspects. A client may be struggling too much with the negative emotions that arose from the event. Respect your client if he/she cannot make a positive shift in perspective and inform him/her that he/she can stop with the exercise at any given moment.

- The benefit finding may not work for everyone. Although most studies showed positive effects, mixed results have been obtained in the cancer literature. For instance, Sears, Stanton, and Danoff-Burg (2003) found no relation between initial benefit finding and distress a year later. In a study by Tomich and Helgeson (2004), initial benefit finding predicted elevated distress months later. Carver and Antoni (2004) speculated that the experience of finding benefits might promote greater emotional turmoil in individuals with worse prognosis, causing negative affect.



References

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Benefit Finding

Instructions

1. Have the client talk about a traumatic event (e.g., loss, severe physical injury, etc.) in as much detail as possible for a few minutes. Have the client try to freely express any and all emotions and thoughts he or she has about the experience.

2. Now have the client focus on the positive aspects of the experience. Below are some questions to help guide the client:

How has the experience changed you?

What has the experience taught you?



How has the experience made you better equipped to meet similar challenges in the future?

How do you feel that this experience has made you grow as a person?