ON FINDING PURPOSE IN ADVERSITY: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE HOLOCAUST CHILD SURVIVORS TO GET THROUGH COVID TIMES

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Abstract - Today, it is imperative and challenging to assess the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on children due to the extreme speed with which the crisis has unfolded. Due to such unprecedented disruptions, the pandemic has triggered a massive spike in uncertainty about the future and general mental illness among children. However, psychological studies and eyewitness accounts of traumatic experiences like the holocaust suggest the implementation of psychological and meaning-building interventions to control the devastating impact of COVID-19 on children and youth. Hence, this paper applies lessons from both holocaust testimonials like Elie Wiesel's Night and Dorinda Nicholson's WWII Kids who Survived Tell their Stories, as well as the research findings of Dr. Seligman's positive psychology, to the present times. Specifically, both documents, in stressing the capacity for meaningful relations and activities (i.e., "Meaning" and "Relationships" as key elements of Dr. Seligman's PERMA model) to generate resilience, can encourage and foster such relationships and activities among children to give them, in a historically proven way, hope and meaning when facing the intense adversity and uncertainty of the present pandemic.

Keywords - Positive Psychology, Children, Post-COVID, Resilience

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself.
Never. " Elie Wiesel, Night

Life completely changed for Eliezer, a 15-year-old teenager and a devout Jew after the invasion of Hungary by Nazi Germany. First published as part of a trilogy, Nobel Laurette Elie Wiesel's Night (1960) chronicles the experience of the Holocaust through the eyes of an adolescent plunged into the unprecedented times of World War II. It is an autobiographical account of the horrors he witnessed confined in the concentration camps as a teenage boy. Another work published by Dorinda Makanaonalani Nicholson[1], World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Stories (2015), provides first-hand accounts from the children who grew up in the time of war and witnessed the bombings, blackouts, hunger, fear and loss of loved ones. Through the many stories included in this review, Nicholson endeavors to emphasize the quality of resilience in children. She concludes that children "are wise beyond years. They can tell what war does to human spirit" (2015, pg. no. 57). Owing to massive evacuations and displacement, World War II led to complete disruption of life for the children of Europe. Children who witnessed acts of violence during World War II suffered from post-traumatic disorders later (Dunsdon,1941; Bodman, 1941; Bloch et al., 1955). These historical testimonies provide an accurate and comprehensive account of individuals who lived through genocide or other barbarities. Like Night, most of these stories also help in offering a unique perspective on how these young survivors overcame the most severe form of persecution through finding meaning in relationships and hope for the future. For anyone undergoing a traumatic life event, these accounts provide hope and exemplary models of resilience and humans' ability to adapt and rebuild.Since wars, pandemics and natural disasters of any kind are harbingers of uncertainty about the future and fear of loss of life, their effects have led to increased interest in their psychological impact on the mental health of children. This paper examines the evidence and applications of positive psychology in children impacted by war and other mass traumas, as demonstrated in Wiesel's Night and Nicholson's World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Stories. Furthermore, I consider eminent psychologist Martin Seligman's[2] PERMA model to effectively

[1]Known as "The Pearl Harbor Child" and an award-winning author of *A Child's View of Pearl Harbor from Attack to Peace* (2001), Dorinda Makanaonalani Nicholson rendered a fascinating memoir of what it was like to be a child of six living at the time of Pearl Harbor Attack.

[2]Known as the father of Positive Psychology Dr. Martin Seligman is one of the leading researchers in the whole field of Psychology.

represent the need for “meaning” and “relationships” to survive such trauma. I argue, accordingly, that children’s ability to find meaning and support in such relationships like that of caregivers and parents helps them stay resilient in times of great stress and trauma, a condition of great importance presently during the covid pandemic. This claim finds support via the historical example and precedent of those who persevered through and beyond the holocaust, as these historical testimonies provide clear accounts about how support from caregivers, parents and educators for the children involved bolstered a sense of purpose in life and reinforced positive psychology.Having lived amidst quarantines and lockdowns over the last two years has negatively affected the psychological well-being of many individuals. Even though the children affected worldwide by the disease have been small, containment measures and lifestyle disruption have significantly impacted their mental health causing symptoms of "anxiety and depression” in them (Rosen et al., 2021). In 2021 March, CNBC published a report on a statement given by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. In it, he discusses the impact of the Corona Virus on the mental health of communities and states that the outbreak has caused more "mass trauma" than World War Two (Feuer, 2021). Indeed, the COVID 19 pandemic has caused a significant rise in mental health issues amongst people because of such traumas as loss of family members, illness, and economic difficulties, not to mention the monotony and loneliness. The shared nature of such misery has brought us together to seek out and offer comfort and friendship to others. Today people are finding ways to cope with the psychological and practical realities of COVID-19. Hence, the positive psychology movement has gained attention as a means of preventing ill mental health with a purpose of enhancing well-being through meaningful relationships and fostering hope. Dr. Seligman’s research insights into positive psychology suggest that the five elements of the PERMA Model can help people live a life richer in fulfilment, happiness and meaning; moreover, the simplicity and practical applicability of this model makes it an ideal tool for this purpose.When considering trends within the discussed body of literature, scholars of positive psychology assert the need to address the implications of a traumatic experience in children and look for therapeutic measures (Carrion and Kletter, 2012). However, in research prior to Seligman’s development of positive psychology, evidence-based studies have confirmed the presence of similar positive development trajectories among children who managed to sustain themselves despite such adversity (Baráth, 2002) and identified factors that seemed to foster the ability of children to overcome the trauma of war: "a sense of agency; social intelligence, empathy, and affect regulation; shared experience, caregiving features, and community connection; a sense of future, hope and growth; a connection to spirituality; and morality" (Betancourt and Khan, 2008). Prominent psychologist Dr ÁrpádBaráth’s study[3] furthermore states that sometimes it is the personal attitude and general pattern of behavior that determine how a child reacts to challenging circumstances. Correspondingly, scholarly debates on the role of positive psychology during adverse circumstances support Baráth’s claim that people display remarkable resilience and strength if they see new possibilities for themselves in the future, which is often the result of an interpersonal dynamic (Roepke and Seligman, 2015). It is seen that in order to cope in these extreme circumstances children choose a wide range of healthy coping mechanisms related to "sensory, physical, intellectual and creative activities" (Baráth, 2002, pg. 215). Therefore, it can be concluded that most children are resilient and can find healthy ways to cope during challenging circumstances.Originating from the Latin word resiliens, “resilience[4]” refers to the act of rebounding, an ability which may be acquired through reinforcing Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model. It is often astounding how people bounce back after their experiences of severe trauma by successfully adapting during adverse circumstances. When considering positive approaches during challenging times, Seligman's PERMA model offers concepts and solutions which clarify resilience in such historical conditions. As one of the leading researchers in the field of positive psychology, Seligman’s research implies that the five elements of the PERMA model (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement) play a critical role in equipping individuals with the right tools to find meaning to live and enrich their quality of life (Seligman, 2018). Clearly, the elements making up the PERMA model are threatened by present conditions regarding COVID, as they have been during past instances of historic stress.By placing Wiesel’s Night and Nicholson’s World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Stories in the context of the above scholarly analysis, it is observed that two elements of the PERMA model, “Meaning” and

His work revolves around the topics of depression, resilience, optimism and pessimism.

[3]Study on the Psychological Status of children of Sarajevo who endured almost four years of siege by Bosnian Serbs in 1992-1995

[4]The concept of Resilience emerged in the 1950s from a longitudinal study on Infants born in Hawaii, where Dr. Emmy Werner observed that some children, despite being exposed to risks, had good outcomes, and not all of them succumbed to adverse life events. Werner was one of the early scientists to use the term *resilience*, and a field of research on resilience was generated to understand the specific differences in the children who thrived in adversity.

"Relationships," were (and are) prominently supportive in fostering resilience in these children. Indeed, World War II produced ample data, as in these works, that trauma in children led to mental illness, nervousness, trembling, crying and even aggressive behavior (Dunsdon,1941; Bodman, 1941; Bloch et al., 1955). We see evidence of such aggression through Nicholson's account of a teenage Jewish boy who shot a German official in order to avenge the Nazi mistreatment of his parents suggests that there was a burning quest for justice and revenge even in children (Nicholson, 2015, pg.13). However, in agreement with Dr ÁrpádBaráth's aforementioned claim that the way a child reacts to any adverse circumstance is determined by one's personal behavior we also witness a contrast through Elie Wiesel who endured the severe cruelties of war by depending on his father for love and support. During the long run to Gleiwitz, he says, "My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me [from allowing myself to die] …I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support" (Wiesel, 2008, pg.87). Thus, these examples demonstrate two distinct attitudes towards in the times of adversity. On one hand we see Eliezer's love and hope of solidarity with his father which were stronger forces of survival than his instinct for self-preservation. And on the other hand we observe aggression, an urge to avenge the sufferings and sometimes even inability to fathom the reason for their plight through Nicholson's account of war affected children.Whether during WWII or the present pandemic, the literature suggests that children resort to healthy coping mechanisms to sail through difficult situations, which also helps them see hope and new possibilities in the future. Sometimes they also find comfort in the presence of their friends, family and even acquaintances which additionally fosters their ability to respond positively to difficult times. No wonder, then, that Elie responds to the polish violinist Juliek's musical activity, when on the brink of death in the camp, as productive of humor, and therefore meaning, despite the adverse circumstance. Eliezer (Elie) knew Juliek as "the boy from Warsaw who played the violin in the Buna Orchestra..." Elie finding comfort in Juliek's music not only aligns with Barath's claim that children resort to healthy coping mechanisms like music to escape the challenges of an adverse circumstance, but also reflects Seligman's emphasis on find meaning and hope through relationships (i.e., Elie's relationship with Juliek as well as his music). Thus, the study of the memoirs and stories of these children confirm that their reaction to adversity is subjective and that not all children respond in the same way. Eliezer demonstrates the presence of "meaning" (Seligman, 2011) and looked forward towards his union with his family or father at the end of the war. Wiesel also chronicles instances of children who found emotional support for the uncertainties of the time through different means in their siblings or caregivers. With Covid claiming the lives of many older figures like parents and guardians, this connection between resilience and meaningful relationships remains particularly pertinent. In World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Stories, Nicholson demonstrates the same production of meaning through relationship through the accounts provided. Specifically, Nicholson records 14-year-old Lily Lebovitz from Munkacs, Czechoslovakia who describes her harrowing experience of her days at the concentration camp with her sister: "More than 150 bodies crisscrossed on top of each other. The lucky ones on the top of the human pile got the most air, they also escaped the human waste that sifted down through each layer as the train swayed along the tracks" (25) Despite the overwhelming trauma of her situation, she also hints at the support she received from her sister, who "would worry about me even though she was younger." (26) Another 14-year-old, HediWachenheimer describes how she was "traumatized" by the events of war and that she did not let her mother or aunt out of her sight: "even if one had to go to the bathroom, I insisted all three of us go together" (14). These anecdotes support the scholarly assertions that a child's response to adversity can be moderated with support from loved ones (Barath, Bentacourt, Khan). Betancourt and Khan's study, as well as Baráth's survey, underscore how parents, caregivers, and educators determine a child's reaction in adverse circumstances. In addition to this, Roeple and Seligman assert that envisioning new possibilities and looking for positive opportunities in the future is an integral part of sailing through difficult times. They claim people who see new doors opening can walk through them and are more likely to thrive after adversity.In conclusion, it is clear that the efficacy of resilience in positive psychology can be examined in the reflections and testimonies of war-affected children to address the mental health problems and potential solutions that children face and require during COVID times. Both the research-based claims of the aforementioned scholars and the memoirs of holocaust survivors determine that, despite the negative impact of war, children who use healthy coping mechanisms tend to anchor themselves out of stressful times through the resilience generated. A convergence of perspective is also clear between Dr Baráth's findings and Roepke and Seligman's claims, which states the significance of looking at the bright side of things. Posed within Dr Baráth's study is the crucial notion that caregivers and educators play an essential role in how a child reacts to adversities, which also converges with Dr Seligman and the elements of his PERMA model. As the coronavirus pandemic continues to generate uncertainty about the future, it will continue to traumatize children. Accordingly, we ought to extend our learnings from both the holocaust survivors and scholars like Baráth's and Seligman to the present

times; specifically, we can encourage and foster relationships and activities among children that will give them the kind of hope and meaning that has historically proven to effectively generate resilience in times of extreme adversity.

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