

A Wind Shift Toward Positive Psychology and Adult Resilience

Carl V. Rabstajnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

I was searching for a title and a way to begin this essay when I came upon an article in the March 20, 2000, *Forbes* magazine, titled: “Good Grief! The Counselors are Everywhere!” Dan Seligman, the author, questioned the reasonableness of a 2,487% increase in grief in the 1990’s decade. His statistics may be questioned because he compares mention of “grief counseling” in Nexis as 76 times in 1989 and 1,966 times in 1999. Nevertheless, his observation is worth considering.

Seligman wrote “you are **spitting into the wind** if you tell people to just seek consolation from friends and family. Or dare to suggest that much of life’s unpleasantness is something you can learn to live with.” This piece will show how attitudes toward **adult human resilience** changed in the last decade, hence the title.

Positive Psychology Emerges

Seligman was writing at a time when the wind was just beginning to shift. The *Forbes* article was published shortly after the *American Psychologist*, prime journal of the American Psychological Association, dedicated its January 2000 issue to “**Positive Psychology**,” with an introduction by Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Fifteen additional articles discussed issues of happiness, well-being, individual development, optimism, friends, self-determination, adaptation, positive illusions, emotion and health, wisdom, excellence, creativity, giftedness, and positive youth development. Prior to this, psychology mainly focused on dysfunction, deficits, weakness, need, dependency, and psychopathology. There were and are good reasons to focus on mental illness and its treatment, but we must not lose sight of normal human strengths.

September 11, 2001, and Public Awareness

The attack on the World Trade Center was described in the June 1, 2002, issue of *Smart Money*, by Anne Kadet, as a “cultural phenomenon” that showed how massive the counseling industries have become. She reports the city was inundated with over 9,000 grief counselors. While there were large contingents of “helpers” showing up at prior tragic events, Kadet contends “it took a tragedy on this scale to provide a full look at just how massive the industry has become -- and how ingrained it is in our society.” A conservative estimate of practitioners in the field was 270,000; for comparison, about double the number of dentists.

Grief and trauma industries were assisted by actions of the American Psychiatric Association. The APA first included Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in their third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III)*, in 1980. A fourth edition, *DSM-IV*, in 1994,

expanded the definition to include “awareness of” to the actual experience of a trauma. Thus, as the 20th century waned, PTSD became a bona fide focus of counselors.

Empirically Demonstrated Adult Resilience

George A. Bonanno had been conducting and reviewing research on grief and trauma reactions since the 1990s. After 9/11, he wrote and co-authored several excellent articles on the over-expectations of PTSD and chronic grief. Many empirical studies were reviewed and people were grouped into four categories with occurring frequencies:

- Chronic Reaction 10-30%
- Delayed Reaction 5-10%
- Recovery over Time 15-35%
- Resilient 35-55%

Graphs showing the trajectory of these reactions and the above statistics were shown in a short 2005 article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a publication of the American Psychological Society.

A more extensive article by Bonanno was first published in the January 2004 issue of *American Psychologist* and reprinted in the first 2008 issue of *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. This paper presents reasons that grief and trauma therapists *over generalized* their expectations to include *all* people. Ability to handle distress was previously attributed to pathology or exceptional mental health, in the 1990s.

The foundation for this misconception goes back to Freud and was reinforced by John Bowlby, a popular theorist who in 1969, 1973, and 1980 published three volumes on *Attachment and Loss*. The part of his theory that emphasized the importance of close interaction between a child and his or her mother to normal social development was challenged earlier, but the separation, loss, and trauma part remained until recently.

Classification and *Primum Non Nocere*

Continuation of universal programs would be less of a problem if they merely entertained or wasted time and money for those who did not need the treatment. Unfortunately, it has now been shown that including everyone in the same counseling modality caused harm among the resilient and naturally recovered; and violated the edict: *primum non nocere* — first, do no harm.

Preventing harm is not the only reason for concern. Precious time, money, attention, and effort are diverted from those prone to chronic and delayed reactions to trauma.

This essay has not extensively developed each of the elements in this argument but has provided useful initial references for those who wish to pursue the subject in depth. The papers are readily available with today’s technology. They are in full-text databases and copies can be downloaded. College and community librarians can help you gain ready access.