

WHEN LIFE KNOCKS YOU DOWN, WHAT HELPS YOU STAND BACK UP?



ILLNESS. DEATH. JOB LOSS. VIOLENCE.

At some point, life knocks us all down. Yet while some people struggle for years, others recover more quickly.

PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS

Psychologists have long debated why some people manage to stand back up. One explanation points to primal world beliefs—often shortened to “primals”—deep expectations about the nature of the world, such as whether it is safe or dangerous, beautiful or ugly.

A recent study of 1,000 people showed that most people assume that primal world beliefs reflect how hard someone's life has been. A classic psychological theory takes this popular assumption further: maybe trauma shatters these beliefs, increasing anxiety and depression.



A recent study found that people who view the world as “dangerous” estimated major threats at rates **4.2 times higher** than those who see it as “safe.” Notably, people who viewed the world as safe made more accurate estimates overall.

Primal World Beliefs are our most basic beliefs about the world as a whole.

DO TERRIBLE EVENTS SHATTER SOME PEOPLE'S PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS?

Some researchers have thought so, but a growing body of research, including our own new study, suggests something different.

Over the past few years, psychologists have begun to explore whether primal world beliefs act as filters, shaping how we interpret nearly everything that happens to us, including traumatic events.

Instead of difficult events shaping beliefs afterward, **maybe the beliefs you hold beforehand matter most.**

TWO SCIENTIFIC STUDIES AIMED TO FIND OUT

To test these competing explanations, we conducted two studies focused on very different forms of adversity.

STUDY #1

People with Major Health Challenges

- 551 cancer patients, cancer survivors, and people with cystic fibrosis
- 501 healthy participants for comparison



STUDY #2

A Community Rocked by Violence

- Students studied before and after a campus shooting
- The event resulted in three student deaths, multiple injuries, shelter-in-place orders, canceled classes, and prolonged disruption



RESULTS

1

PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS CHANGED LITTLE AFTER DISTRESSING EVENTS

People with cystic fibrosis scored no differently on primal beliefs than the healthy comparison group. Similarly, students' beliefs remained remarkably stable even after the campus shooting—they continued to see the world much as they had before.

2

THREE PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS PREDICTED RECOVERY

For example, when it came to mental health, those with these three primal world beliefs looked no worse than people who had never experienced the terrible life event.

The world is:

Improvable

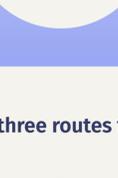
(as in malleable to efforts to improve it)



The world is:

Fair

(as in a place where what goes around comes around)



The world is:

Regenerative

(as in the natural tendency of all things is regeneration and healing versus degeneration and decay)



These beliefs can provide three routes for improving the situation

“you and I can make this better”

“a higher power intervenes”

“it will get better on its own”

Without them, you are more likely to feel hopeless on all three counts.

Findings suggest that, if you see the world as improvable, fair, and naturally prone to heal, bad things will still knock you down, but you may find new strength to stand back up.

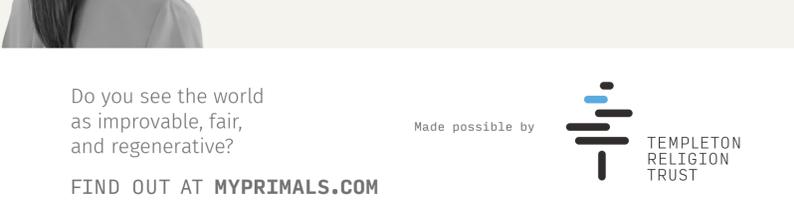
QUOTE PULLED FROM STUDY

If one sees the world as a place where most circumstances resist human efforts to improve it, are chronically unfair, and naturally tend to devolve, decay, and fall apart, the arrival of great misfortune can signal that good times are permanently over and “it's all downhill from here.”

PRIMALS

DO WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE OUR PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS?

Although world beliefs usually don't change much, research suggests that's probably because nobody is trying to change them.



Do you see the world as improvable, fair, and regenerative?

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