

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 stand back up after hardship. 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, which many assume are shaped by life experiences.



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# ALL 26 PRIMALS ARE THOUGHT TO BE LENSES AS TO HOW WE SEE THE WORLD.

For example, looking at the “safe” world belief, a study found that people who view the world as “dangerous” estimated major threats at rates **420% higher** than those who see it as “safe.”

Notably, people who viewed the world as safe made more accurate estimates overall.<sup>1</sup>



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To test whether adversity changes beliefs or whether preexisting beliefs shape responses to adversity, 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



# THREE PRIMAL WORLD BELIEFS PREDICTED RECOVERY

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”*



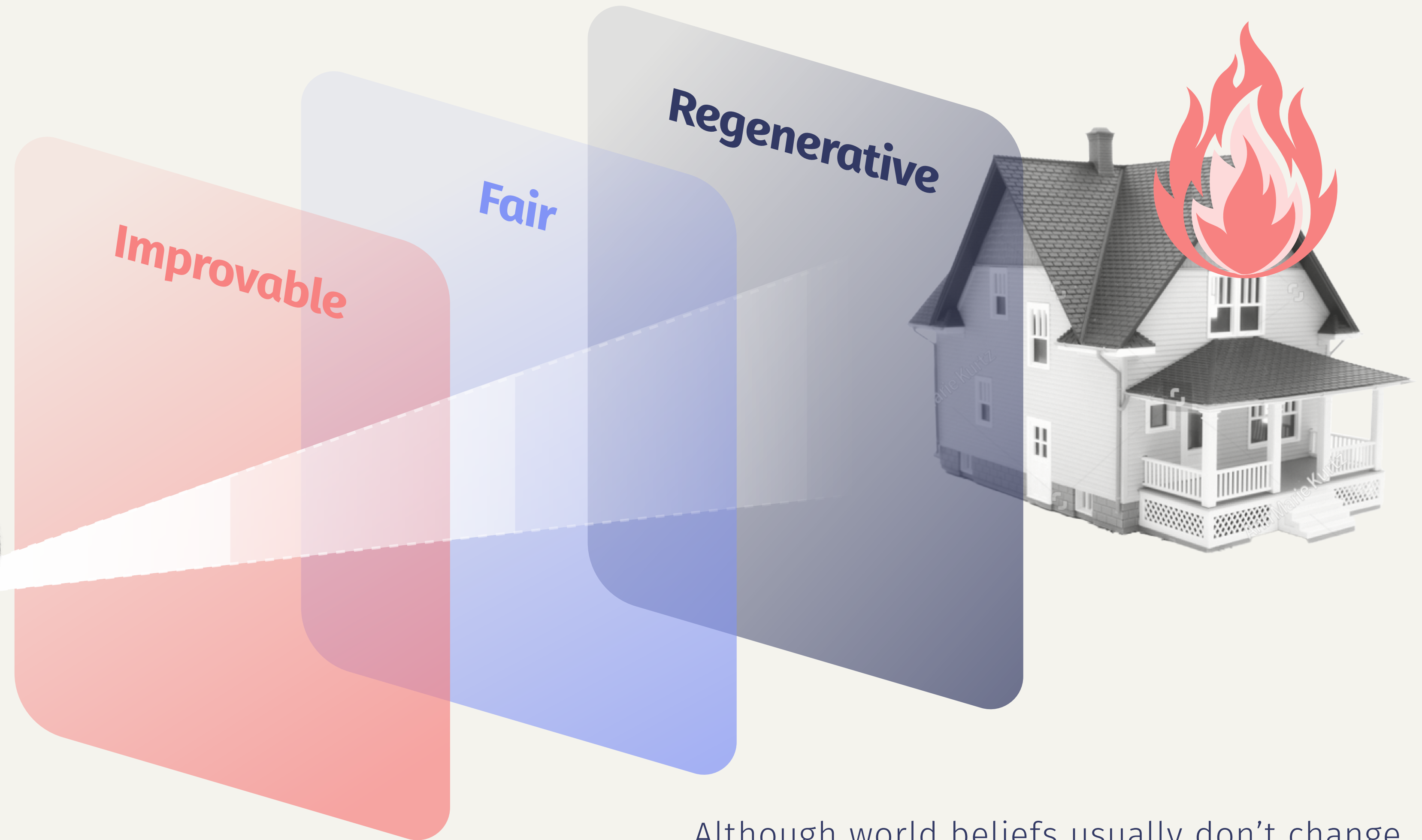


QUOTE PULLED FROM STUDY

**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.”*



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.

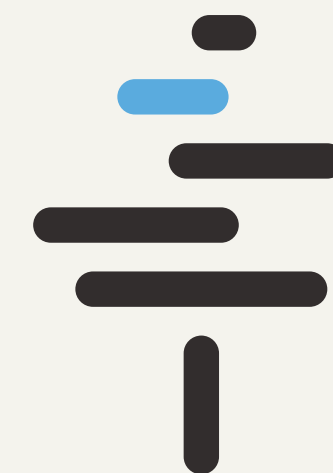


Do you see the world as a place that needs you?  
How do you compare to others?

**FIND OUT AT MYPRIMALS.COM**

1. Kerry, N. & Clifton, J. D. W. (2026). From bear attacks to neutral faces, dangerous world belief uniquely predicts elevated perception of threat. Journal of Individual Differences. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-0001/a000458>.

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