

What to do when bad things happen to good people, including yourself

When I was growing up a doctor wrote a book called: *Why bad things happen to good people*. The title has stuck with me my whole life. The author wrote about his son's terminal illness. Bad things happen to both good people and bad. For 2500 years various religious traditions have reminded us that life is suffering. Modern icons remind us "shit happens". Deaths, disease, injustice, accidents, natural disasters even common mistakes are part of life every bit as much as birth, love, music, success and happiness.



The way it was

There are things we can do to minimise the risk of bad things happening. Religions are the common repository of wisdom in this regard as they tend to remind us of the warning signs of what has caused harm to people before us. In their various traditions religions remind us to avoid certain foods, substances, people and behaviours because while they may bring short-term pleasure they inevitably bring long term pain. Governments, in response to having to pay for people in need, offer a repository of suggestions including safety, health and environmental regulations to minimise the risk of us damaging ourselves and others. Culture and family behaviours also provide guidance, usually in the forms of values and traditions which tend to bring more happiness and reduce suffering. These values and traditions influence how we treat each other in our day to day lives e.g. integrity, teamwork, sacrifice, collaboration, respect, kindness, frequenting certain places/people while avoiding others etc.



The world today

Globalisation has caused the mixing of people into new situations where they brush up against different religions, governments, cultures and family values. The internet is exposing us to everything imaginable, both good and bad, from all corners of our globe. These two trends, unprecedented in human history, are causing people to question, alter, reject and sometimes reinvent the suggestions our ancestors have given us in hope of increasing our happiness and alleviating our suffering.

Modern responses to "living right" include exercise and diet regimes, self-help books, education and training and a myriad of government regulations. Attempts to improve our human condition are also causing a growing divide between liberal and conservative lifestyles, laws and communities with both extremes arguing their way is best.

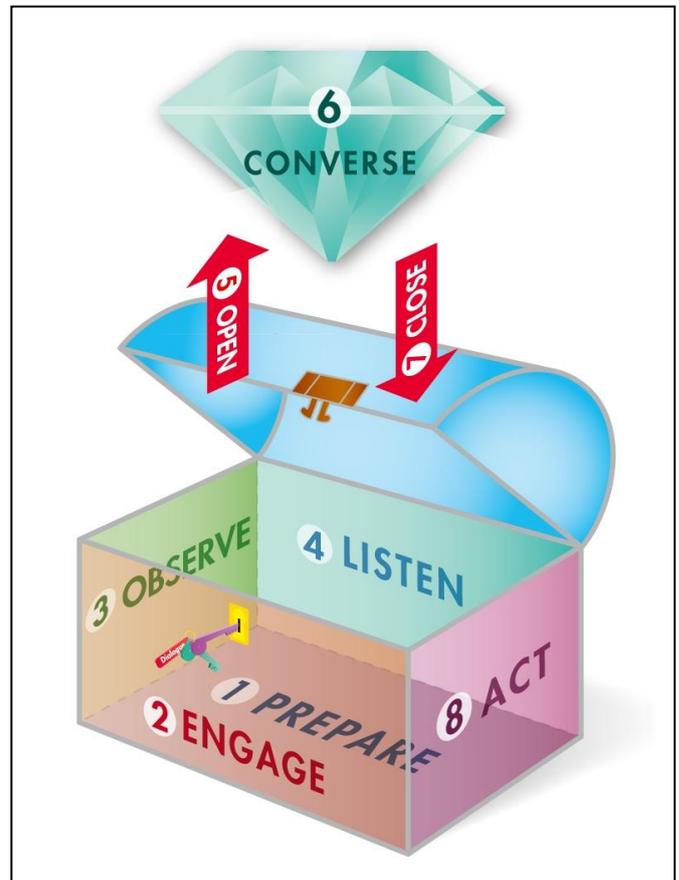


Despite all of our efforts to improve the human condition bad things still happen to good people and so part of learning to live happily has to include knowing how to best react to these situations. Eastern literature sometimes refers to bad things happening as being hit by an arrow and while there is little you can do to prevent this first occurrence there is a lot you can do to avoid your negative reaction causing you to be hit by a second and sometimes more damaging arrow. There are many tried and true techniques available to ensure your reaction doesn't cause being hit by a second arrow. Psychology and in particular psychoanalysis provide guidance on overcoming the pain left behind by the first arrow. I set out below tips for all three conditions:

1. How to heal the pain left behind when bad things happen
2. How to eliminate problems caused by reacting negatively when bad things happen
3. How to minimise the risk of bad things happening to you

How to overcome the hurt left behind when bad things happen

Seeking professional help is useful and in some cases essential for overcoming the physical, mental and emotional pain left behind when bad things happen. The British axiom of “keep calm and carry on” is a good way to prevent getting stuck in a rut but it doesn't specifically address the pain. I have found in my experience that it is useful to keep calm and carry on while at the same time dealing with the pain directly, through dialogue with others and by attending to your thoughts.



Dissipate the pain through dialogue with others

Dialogue is therapeutic because a problem shared is a problem halved. Dialogue harnesses the reality that human beings like to help each other and can do so when they know someone is in need. Help can vary from a hug and compassion to concrete solutions, referrals and time spent together. It is useful to remember that a wound left untreated can get infected and cause death but a wound properly treated repairs itself and the scar is often stronger than the skin it replaced. Dialogue helps alleviate pain because the pain itself dissipates when it is shared. You might feel sadness or compassion when a friend or family member shares bad news with you and often victims don't want to burden others but in fact the opposite is true because in sharing, the pain dissipates and the listener feels helpful. If your loved one was hurting wouldn't you want to help?



Dissipate the pain by thinking about the pain in a new way

Attending to your thoughts or thinking about your thinking is another great way to dissipate the pain when bad things happen. Modern neuroscience provides the proof this works so here is one thing you can do yourself right now. If you have suffered something bad and choose to avoid it you might succeed for a very long time but it never ever goes away. A friend of mine described recently how his father ran scared every night in fear of being in a prisoner of war camp in North Korea. His father fought in Korea in the 1950's but never spoke of it to his family for 60 years. He avoided his pain for his entire adult life until the pain exposed itself with the onslaught of Alzheimer's. Untreated pain seldom goes away by itself.

To treat and dissipate the pain from your mind, meditate on the memories and images causing your pain. To do this close your eyes and identify the place in your body where it hurts most. Imagine it as well as you can, then without losing the image you have created begin to imagine the area around where this took place including the temperature, light, sounds, smells etc. Invoke your senses to picture the wider area.



Now widen your image further to the city and then the province in which this incident took place. Keep widening your image further to include the whole country and then the entire earth.

Keep growing the picture in your mind until your pain is seen in this wider context. Imagine your pain being one of the lights on earth in a photo taken from a satellite

high above the earth at night. Now imagine the other lights on earth represent other people's pain. Narrow your focus towards one of these other lights as if you were zooming in using Google Earth. As you get to street level feel your compassion for the pain that person is also suffering. Recognise you are not alone. Recognise that no matter how you feel you are part of life and you matter as much as others. You are not alone.

Now still with your eyes closed slowly bring your attention back to your light and recognise the light is emanating from your heart and soul and not from your pain. The light has moved. The pain is still there but its intensity has dimmed and you are beginning to feel different than before having changed the focus of your mind's eye. Now slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings in the room where you are sitting and begin to open your eyes. You have just dissipated some of the pain in your minds' eye. Congratulations you have just dissipated your pain. Keep repeating this exercise until you feel it is gone or reduced in size to no longer bother you. Like a scar on your arm you will know it is there when you touch it and you will remember the incident that caused it but once the pain is dissipated you forget the scar is even there.



How to improve your reaction when bad things happen

The list below sets out some of the things I have learned and practice to avoid making things worse when bad things happen, or in other words to prevent being hit by the second arrow. Take a moment to circle the things on the list which you wish to practice more often in an attempt to minimise negative reactions.

De-escalate YOUR stress

Behave Differently

1. Do nothing & allow time to better define your reaction
2. Honestly recognise & manage your emotions
3. Meditate: Breath in reflecting on suffering & breath out reflecting on compassion
4. Prepare your concessions: "If I do this...then will you do that?"
5. Remember we are all one
6. Take a time out to calm down
7. Accept accusations & write them down without reacting

Think Differently

8. Practice non-attachment
9. Recognise the impermanence of both the problem and the solution
10. Recognise others suffer and hurt like you
11. Address their motivational style
12. Be polite, your rudeness and anger returns to you intensified
13. Stop seeing the situation as black or white, right or wrong, look for a middle way
14. Ask "Whose needs are being addressed"
15. Stop thinking me vs. you and think us

Open Dialogue

16. Stop, wait, shut-up and listen
17. Ask other party what you don't know
18. Replace your assumptions, accusations and assertions about others with questions to test the correctness of your views
19. Stop your revenge and ask "how can I help this person overcome their strong emotions?"
20. Apologise & admit mistakes

De-escalate THEIR stress

Behave Differently

21. Show patience to others
22. Demonstrate love for others
23. Be compassionate about their situation
24. Smile at anger and don't let it affect you
25. Work together to define the problem
26. Propose solutions hypothetically ("What if we....?")
27. Encourage polite behaviour and reward it when shown by others
28. Replace your anger with diplomacy

Think Differently

29. Share your thinking about the situation
30. Share why you think the way you do

Open Dialogue

31. Encourage them to talk
32. Don't react, explain you are listening and considering next steps
33. Validate their feelings (e.g. "It's ok that you feel this way about me/the situation")
34. Brainstorm alternative solutions
35. Forgive others genuinely
36. Encourage dialogue amongst stakeholders to explore different perspectives before deciding how best to proceed
37. Ask others about themselves, their thoughts and feelings
38. Spend informal time together
39. Ask others if they are intentionally accusing you and if so to provide examples
40. Use a mediator or facilitator to assist difficult dialogues & those involving a lot of stakeholders



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How to minimise bad things happening

Values and ethics are instrumental in minimising the bad and optimising the good in your life. Take a moment to write down the values and ethics that guide your lifestyle. Ask yourself what aspects of your life and work conflict with the values and ethics you have written down. Examples of values and ethics common to people today include:

Live with integrity; Respect and protect the earth; Be kind to others, collaborate; Follow the law; Respect human rights; Protect, encourage and educate children; Educate yourself continuously and use what you learn to improve your health and happiness; Be safe, live safe, Love yourself; Have compassion for others, etc.

Write your values and ethics here and ask yourself what observers would say you do to either reinforce or counter your values and ethics in your daily life:

Summary

Life is full of ups and downs and we need to be prepared for both the good and bad, that's life. People in search of paradise, heaven or nirvana need not look any further than the present moment to find what they are searching for provided they employ the tools and techniques given to us by the millions of people who have come before us. Dialogue and attending to our thinking can help us mend the wounds left behind when bad things happen. Stress and conflict management techniques, once learned and practiced, can help minimise and even eliminate the destructive emotions that result from our negative reactions to bad things happening. Values and ethics can go a long way to prevent some of the bad things happening but they can't prevent everything.

Reflect on what you are grateful for and fill your head with the lights which continue to shine in the sky at night representing the compassion others have for us and vice versa as we all share in this one life together.

Peace ☺

Peter Nixon, April 2013
Hong Kong

