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Positive emotions in earthquake survivors in El Salvador (2001)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze, within a more extensive intervention program, the existence of positive emotions and positive coping in the refugees at the two largest shelters created after the earthquakes of El Salvador in January, 2001. One hundred and fifteen survivors were interviewed in the shelters about different aspects related to positive cognitions and emotions experienced during their sojourn at the camps, as well as their perception of aspects of posttraumatic growth. The results show that most of the people affected by the earthquake revealed a consistent pattern of positive reactions and emotions. The potential implications of these results in the individual sphere, as buffering elements to protect people from the effects of a traumatic experience receive comment.

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1. Introduction

According to the World Disasters Report (IFRC-RCS, 2002) in 2001, approximately 170 million people were affected by natural disasters, catastrophes, and wars. Natural disasters were responsible for the death of 665,598 persons between 1991 and 2000, and 39,073 people were reportedly killed by disasters in 2001. The majority of persons affected by disasters live in countries from the southern hemisphere, which suggests that the increase in disasters is related not only to geographic vulnerability factors, but essentially to socioeconomic factors. In fact, on average 13 times more people die due to disasters in poor countries than in developed countries (IFRC-RCS, 2002).

It has been suggested that, natural disasters probably do not have such undesirable consequences as do traumatic events caused by humans (e.g., wars, interpersonal violence, homicides, etc.), because natural disasters do not have a component of intentionality in the damage produced, which may shatter people's core life assumptions about a just and predictable world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, natural events may have devastating consequences in another sense. For example, their typically sudden and unexpected occurrence could foment the psychological conditions of helplessness and vulnerability (Weaver & Clum, 1996). In addition, the losses that these events cause are usually multiple in an individual sense (loss of home, belongings, work, and even of loved ones) as well as in a collective sense (destruction of the social framework, community destructuring, loss of mutual support networks, etc.), with their associated mourning processes (Eisenbruch, 1991; Martín-Beristain, Dona, Páez, Pérez-Sales, & Fernández, 2000).

2. Life events, psychopathology, and resilience

Much of the current literature concerning the psychological consequences of traumatic events has focused on the concept of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Studies of the general population indicate a lifetime prevalence of "traumatic events" in more than 50% (Breslau, Davis, & Andreski, 1995). Taking into account that the estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD is only 1–3% in the general population (5–15%, if the less severe forms are included)—Kessler (2000)—it is evident that research must pay much more attention to the remaining majority of the population who, despite having suffered at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, have not developed PTSD.

The relatively low prevalence of PTSD among persons exposed to traumatic situations coincides with the research about factors that determine psychological well-being. These investigations show that the influence of *objective* life events and external circumstances is fairly irrelevant when determining subjective well-being. In fact, despite the popularity of the stress model in psychopathology, the total loading of stressful factors only accounts for 10% of the total variance of

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