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Abstract

Can experiencing adversity enhance people's appreciation for life's small pleasures? To examine this question, we asked nearly 15,000 adults to complete a vignette-based measure of savoring. In addition, we presented participants with a checklist of adverse events (e.g., divorce, death of a loved one) and asked them to indicate whether they had experienced any of these events and, if so, to specify whether they felt they had emotionally dealt with the negative event or were still struggling with it. Although people who were currently struggling with adversity reported a diminished proclivity for savoring positive events, individuals who had dealt with more adversity in the past reported an elevated capacity for savoring. Thus, the worst experiences in life may come with an eventual upside, by promoting the ability to appreciate life's small pleasures.

Keywords

adversity, savoring, emotion regulation

It's the bad days that make the good days seem better.

~ Unknown Author

The quote above, or a variant of it, is often repeated on particularly bad days. It provides some solace by implying that experiencing hardship can provide a pathway toward enhanced appreciation of positive events. In the current study, we tested this idea by examining the relationship between adverse experiences and people's tendency to savor life's simple pleasures.

Recent research shows that negative events are linked to surprising benefits. In particular, Seery, Holman and Silver (2010) found that having experienced a moderate amount of adversity in one's life predicted fewer posttraumatic stress symptoms, lower global distress and lower functional impairment, as well as increased satisfaction with life. According to their theoretical perspective, adverse experiences promote hardiness and resilience, shaping how people handle subsequent negative experiences (Seery, Holman & Silver, 2010). For example, Seery and colleagues measured participants' reactions to immersing their hands in ice-cold water (Seery, Leo, Lupien, Kondrak & Almonte, 2013). Individuals who had experienced a moderate amount of adversity reported the lowest levels of pain and negative emotion.

Going beyond examining how adversity shapes people's responses to negative experiences (e.g., an ice bath), we explored whether adversity also predicts responses to positive experiences (e.g., a warm bubble bath). Specifically, we predicted that individuals who had experienced higher levels of adversity in the past would exhibit an enhanced proclivity to savor positive events.

Savoring is a form of emotion regulation used to prolong and enhance positive emotional experiences (Bryant, 1989, 2003; Bryant, Chadwick & Kluwe, 2011). For example, one could savor the positive experience of an evening bubble bath by looking forward to it during the day and immersing oneself in the sensory experience during the bath. In contrast, one could undermine the positivity of this experience by thinking about all the chores that need to be done after the bath, or dwelling on aspects that could be improved (e.g., wishing for scented candles). In recent years, researchers have developed reliable self-report measures that capture the multidimensional construct of savoring (e.g., Nelis, Quoidbach, Hansenne & Mikolajczak, 2011; Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, Mikolajczak, 2010).

Ironically, savoring may be undermined by positive life circumstances. Wealthier people report diminished savoring compared to less affluent individuals, perhaps because wealth offers abundant access to enjoyable experiences, reducing the drive to savor life's small pleasures (Quoidbach, Dunn, Petrides, & Mikolajczak, 2010). A recent experiment showed that people savored a common pleasure (chocolate) less when they were given unlimited access to it than when they were

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temporarily deprived of it (Quoidbach & Dunn, 2013). More broadly, people who have experienced hardship during their lifetimes might be motivated to savor positive events when they do happen.

This is not to say, however, that adversity is beneficial under all circumstances. Even if negative life events produce benefits over time, these events are detrimental to psychological health in the short-term (see Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In fact, while people are in the midst of adversity, their ability to savor positive events is likely compromised due to the presence of negative feelings, which are strongly associated with diminished savoring (Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). Thus, although we predicted that having dealt with adversity in the past would promote savoring, we also expected that struggling with current adversity would be negatively associated with savoring.

Research on posttraumatic growth provides some support for our prediction that emotionally overcoming a negative event is an important prerequisite for turning adversity into appreciation. Although there is no clear consensus as to how the concept of posttraumatic growth should be defined or measured (Joseph & Linley, 2006), researchers typically ask participants to self-report whether they have changed in personally meaningful ways since experiencing a trauma. Through this process of conscious self-reflection, many people report that their self-worth, self-definition, and life priorities have undergone some degree of change in the wake of a trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). Thus, consistent with the literature on posttraumatic growth, we propose that overcoming adversity might build a person's psychological resources.

Our research, however, moves beyond the broad (and sometimes ill-defined) concept of posttraumatic growth and specifically examines the more focused construct of savoring. In

addition, rather than asking individuals to reflect on how much they have changed as the result of a specific trauma, we measure how much adversity individuals are currently dealing with and have dealt with in the past, examining the correlation between adversity levels and savoring. We predicted that (a) current adversity would be associated with diminished savoring, but also that (b) past adversity would be associated with elevated savoring.

Method

Participants

We recruited 14,986 francophone volunteers as part of a large online survey on emotions and well-being. The opportunity to participate in this survey was advertised during the *France 2* television series "*Leurs Secrets du Bonheur*" ("Their Secrets of Happiness")—a French television program that aired in the fall of 2011. A link to the online survey was placed on the program website. Participants were given no financial compensation but were told before participating that they would receive feedback about their levels of well-being when the study was complete. A large majority of the sample was French, though respondents from other francophone countries also participated; respondents varied widely in their level of education and income (see Table 1). The mean age of the sample was 39.72 years (Age range: 15 to 90; $SD = 13.70$) and 83% of participants were female. The surveys were administered in French and all measures were completed online.

Procedure

As part of a larger study on well-being, interested participants clicked the link on the program website. From there, they were

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample.

Country of Residence	Level of Education	Monthly Income After Taxes
France	84.6%	No diploma 1.6%
Belgium	9.5%	Junior high school 3.9%
Switzerland	2.5%	Technical high school 8.6%
Other (e.g., Canada; African countries)	3.4%	High school 13.3%
		Community college 15.8%
		Bachelor's degree 16.7%
		Master's degree 14.5%
		PhD, MD, or equivalent 2.5%
		Other, don't know, missing 23.2%
		Less than 500 euros 11.5%
		Between 500 and 1000 euros 12.6%
		Between 1,000 and 1,500 euros 25.2%
		Between 1,500 and 2,000 euros 25.5%
		Between 2,000 and 2,500 euros 10.7%
		Between 2,500 and 3,000 euros 6.5%
		Between 3,000 and 3,500 euros 2.3%
		Between 3,500 and 4,000 euros 2.0%
		Between 4,000 and 4,500 euros 0.7%
		Between 4,500 and 5,000 euros 0.9%
		Between 5,000 and 5,500 euros 0.2%
		Between 5,500 and 6,000 euros 0.5%
		Between 6,000 and 6,500 euros 0.1%
		Between 6,500 and 7,000 euros 0.3%
		Between 7,000 and 7,500 euros 0.0%
		Between 7,500 and 8,000 euros 0.2%
		Between 8,000 and 8,500 euros 0.0%
		Between 8,500 and 9,000 euros 0.0%
		Between 9,500 and 10,000 euros 0.2%
		More than 10,000 euros 0.6%

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Between Key Measures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Savoring									
2. Past adversity	.16								
3. Current adversity	-.22	-.03							
4. Mood	.43	.15	-.40						
5. Age	-.02	.25	.07	.07					
6. Extraversion	.33	.12	-.12	.33	-.04				
7. Neuroticism	-.35	-.20	.31	-.54	-.09	-.15			
8. Conscientiousness	.15	.03	-.12	.23	.09	.06	-.20		
9. Agreeableness	.31	.11	-.13	.36	.12	.10	-.39	.22	
10. Openness to experience	.24	.15	-.06	.19	-.03	.32	-.16	.07	.18

randomly assigned to complete one of several possible studies (see Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013); during this phase, a subset of participants completed a measure of the five core personality traits (e.g., extraversion). After this initial phase, participants were thanked and told that they could continue taking more surveys if they wished. The measures reported in the present study were included in this subsequent survey, which most of the original participants elected to complete. Along with other measures not relevant to the current study, participants reported their past and current adversity levels, followed by a measure of their current mood and, finally, a measure of their savoring ability. Demographic details (e.g., age, education) were collected at the end of the survey.

Measures

Adversity. Participants were asked to report the number of negative life events they had experienced, using a measure of cumulative lifetime adversity (Seery et al., 2010). We chose this measure because it allowed us to assess a wide range of adverse events, from relatively common events (e.g., *divorce of self/parent, experienced discrimination due to ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation*) to severe events (e.g., *serious illness or injury, combat experience*). We adapted the scale by allowing participants to indicate whether each event had happened to them and, if so, to specify whether they felt they had emotionally dealt with the negative event or were still struggling with it. The total number of events checked off the list formed our two predictor variables: *past adversity* (i.e., the number of negative events with which people had dealt) and *current adversity* (i.e., the number of negative events people with which people were still struggling).

Savoring. Participants completed the Emotion Regulation Profile–Revised (ERP-R), which has been shown to provide a reliable and valid measure of savoring ability (Nelis et al., 2011). The ERP-R presents participants with six real-life positive scenarios, such as coming across a lovely waterfall while on a hike. For each scenario, participants select any of eight possible reactions that most closely resemble their own typical reaction to the scenario, selecting all reactions that apply. Half of the possible reactions to each scenario represent amplifying

strategies (e.g., being mindful of the present moment or expressing positive emotions through nonverbal behavior) and the remaining reactions represent dampening strategies (e.g., suppressing positive emotions or being distracted by worries). Participants received one point for each amplifying strategy they selected and lost one point for each dampening strategy they selected. We then aggregated the points from the different scenarios into an overall savoring score, $\alpha = .86$, such that higher scores represent a greater proclivity to reap the most from life's small pleasures (see Nelis, et al., 2011).

Current Mood. Participants reported their current mood according to a single item slider scale, which ranged from 1 to 100.

Personality Traits. As part of the preliminary study described previously (Quoidbach et al., 2013), we obtained personality measures from a subsample of participants ($n = 8,563$) who were asked to complete the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). The TIPI is a brief measure of the five dimensions that underlie human personality (i.e., conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience, and extraversion; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Despite its succinctness, the TIPI has been shown to be a reliable measure and demonstrates convergent validity with lengthier personality measures (Ehrhart et al., 2009; Gosling et al., 2003).

Results

Descriptives

Participants reported experiencing, on average, a total of about 6 of the 35 possible negative events, and 98% of the sample reported experiencing at least one of the events (combining across current and past adversity). These proportions suggest that our sample had experienced levels of adversity similar to nationally representative American samples (e.g., Seery et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, participants reported significantly more past adversity ($M = 4.45$) than current adversity ($M = 1.71$), $t(14,985) = -76.10$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -.89$, effect size $r = -.41$. Finally, levels of current and past adversity were largely independent, $r = .03$, $p < .001$. See Table 2 for intercorrelations among the key measures. Given

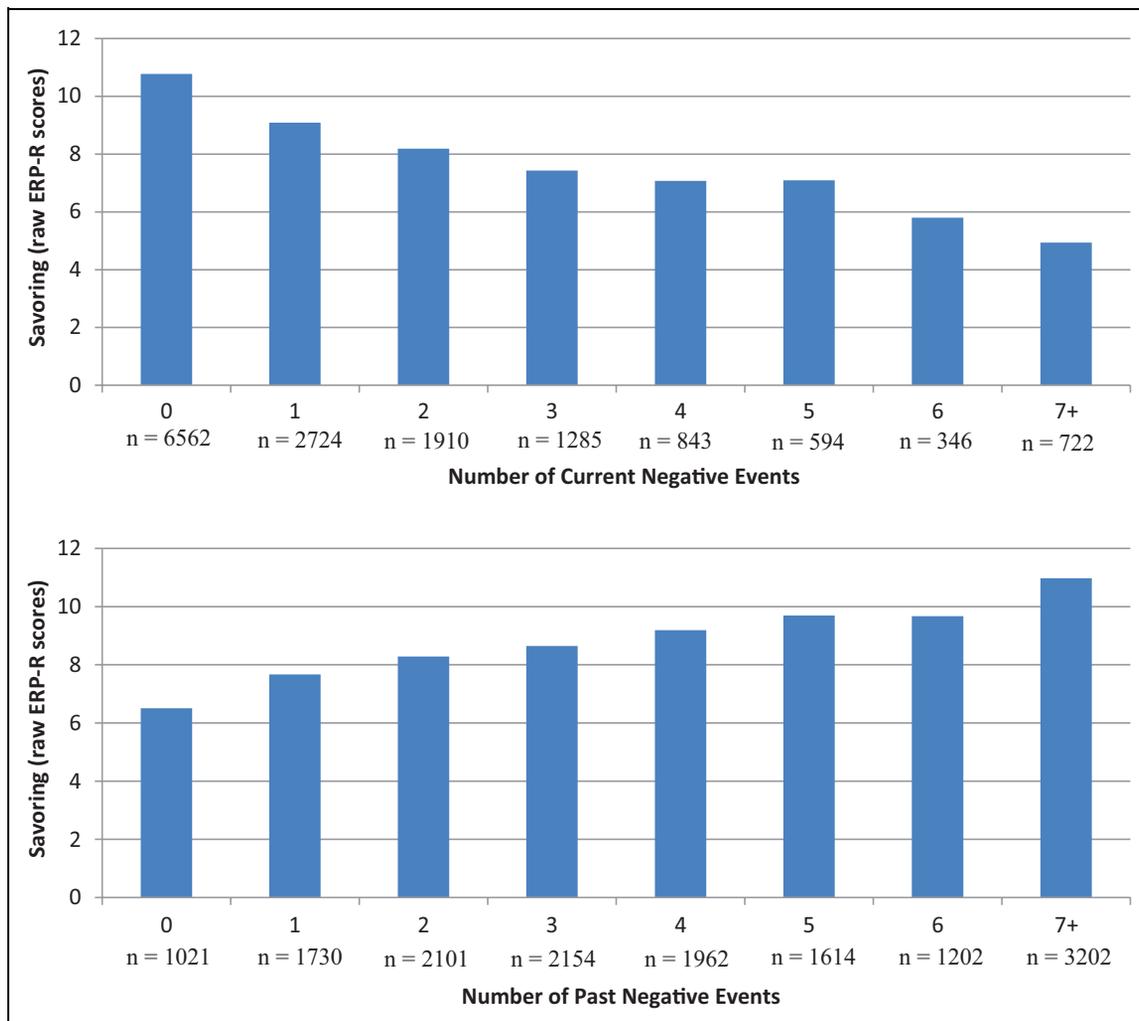


Figure 1. Average savoring scores (raw data) at discrete levels of current and past adversity.

our large sample size, we will not interpret any significant correlation coefficients below .05.

Adversity and Savoring

In order to test the hypothesis that past adversity would positively predict savoring and current adversity would negatively predict savoring, we entered past adversity and current adversity scores into a simultaneous regression analysis predicting participants' scores on the ERP-R measure of savoring.¹ (For graphical representations of the relationship between savoring and discrete levels of past and current adversity, considered separately, see Figure 1.)

As predicted, past adversity was associated with greater savoring, $\beta = .15, p < .001$. In contrast, current adversity was associated with less savoring, $\beta = -.22, p < .001$.² Importantly, the effects remain robust when controlling for individual differences that could plausibly explain these results, such as mood ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .10, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.07, p < .001$), age ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .16, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.21, p < .001$), extraversion ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .12, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.18, p < .001$), neuroticism ($\beta_{\text{past}} =$

$.10, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.12, p < .001$), conscientiousness ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .15, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.20, p < .001$), agreeableness ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .13, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.18, p < .001$), and openness to experience ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .12, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.20, p < .001$). When all these covariates were included together in the regression, past and current adversity each continued to predict savoring, above and beyond these other influential individual difference measures ($\beta_{\text{past}} = .08, p < .001, \beta_{\text{current}} = -.05, p < .001$).

Discussion

By collecting data from almost 15,000 adults, we found evidence that overcoming adversity in the past is linked to greater savoring in the present. In contrast to this apparent silver lining, when people are still struggling with adverse events, their ability to appreciate everyday pleasures is understandably lower. These findings have several important implications. For instance, if dealing with adversity in the past is associated with enhanced savoring in the present, then this link might help to explain the recent discovery that experiencing some adversity

is associated with higher life satisfaction (Seery, 2011; Seery et al., 2010). The ability to savor predicts many desirable outcomes, including promoting overall subjective well-being (see Bryant, 1989, 2003; Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005; Meehan, Durlak, & Bryant, 1993; Quidbach et al., 2010; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Thus, perhaps people who have overcome more adversity in the past are better at savoring life's small pleasures, which in turn could promote greater life satisfaction. Future research using longitudinal study designs could examine this possibility.

It is somewhat surprising to note that we found a linear effect of past adversity on savoring, and our additional analyses (reported in Note 1) suggest that this linear effect fails to level off until individuals have experienced an extremely high level of adversity, reached by very few of our participants. This finding may stem in part from the fact that the adversity checklist included a diverse array of negative events and that we only awarded participants an additional point on this measure for experiencing distinct negative events (e.g., divorce and a tornado), not repeated occurrences within the same category (e.g., two divorces). We would speculate that experiencing a natural disaster, for example, might change people's life stories and enhance their appreciation of each positive moment above and beyond the effects of having gone through a divorce. That said, identifying a possible leveling off point whereby additional adversity fails to promote additional savoring (or even undermines savoring) would be an interesting topic for future research, perhaps with samples of people who are prone to experiencing especially high levels of adversity (e.g., alcoholics, soldiers).

The present findings also suggest that studying savoring could be a fruitful avenue for researchers interested in the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth. We suspect that a well-developed ability to savor pleasurable events might be a necessary precursor to attaining positive growth after traumatic life experiences, although future research is needed to directly examine savoring ability as a mechanism in this context (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

It would also be worthwhile to study the link between adversity and savoring within other specific domains, such as romantic relationships. Past research suggests that the way in which romantic couples respond to pleasant events (e.g., a promotion at work) may matter more for relationship outcomes than how they respond to unpleasant events (e.g., a demotion; Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006). In light of the findings presented here, an interesting question for future research is whether couples who have dealt with more adversity together (e.g., a cancer diagnosis) are more likely to stay together because they make the most of everyday positive events.

A major strength of this study is the very large sample size, which allowed us to capture the great variability in adversity that is likely to be reflected in the true population. Since we observed a wide range of negative experiences on a continuum, we can propose with greater confidence that the effects reported here are likely to reflect the phenomenon at the population level. Importantly, our participants reported

experiencing a similar total percentage of negative events on the adversity checklist as in previous research with a nationally representative sample (Seery et al., 2010). Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that advertising our study during a TV show dedicated to happiness might have led to underrepresenting or overrepresenting certain types of people. In particular, it is conceivable that a program on happiness may have attracted a particularly resilient sample of people who were unusually motivated to turn lemons into lemonade, accounting for our finding that past adversity was positively associated with savoring. Yet, consistent with prior research, individuals in this sample who were currently experiencing adversity reported lower levels of savoring, suggesting that our participants did not respond positively to all forms of adversity. An alternative explanation for our findings based on self-selection would need to account for both the positive effect of past adversity and the negative effect of current adversity on savoring. It is also worth noting that the focal relationship patterns held even when controlling for central individual differences in personality. Thus, it seems unlikely that our findings would only hold up among a narrow sliver of the population.

As with any research using correlational data, our findings do not establish causality and should be interpreted with caution. It is possible that a third, unexamined variable, such as emotional intelligence or social support, is responsible for the observed relationships between adversity and savoring. It is reassuring, however, that our critical effects remain intact even after controlling for the five main dimensions of personality.

In conclusion, our correlational findings are consistent with the possibility that the worst experiences in life may come with an eventual upside, by promoting the ability to appreciate life's small pleasures. Returning to the quote from the beginning of this article, the present research lends some credence to the notion that bad days might make the good ones better.

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Notes

1. In light of past research showing a curvilinear effect of adversity on satisfaction with life (Seery et al., 2010), we also tested for quadratic effects in our data; however, it appears that in the current study reporting of a linear effect is the more conservative approach. Specifically, adding a quadratic term on the second step of our regression analyses did not explain any meaningful additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .07$). Furthermore, the points at which the lines

begin to curve happen at very extreme numbers of negative life events (nearly 17 events), which less than 1% of our sample actually report having experienced. In sum, there is an overall trend suggesting that more past and less current adversity predicts more positive outcomes, up to a very extreme point that is not represented well enough to support inference beyond it.

2. Although we expected two independent main effects, whereby past adversity and current adversity would predict savoring in opposite directions, we also tested an additional model that included an interaction term. The interaction term Past Adversity \times Current Adversity was not significant even with our large sample size, $\beta = -.004$, $p = .630$, and thus will not be considered further.

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