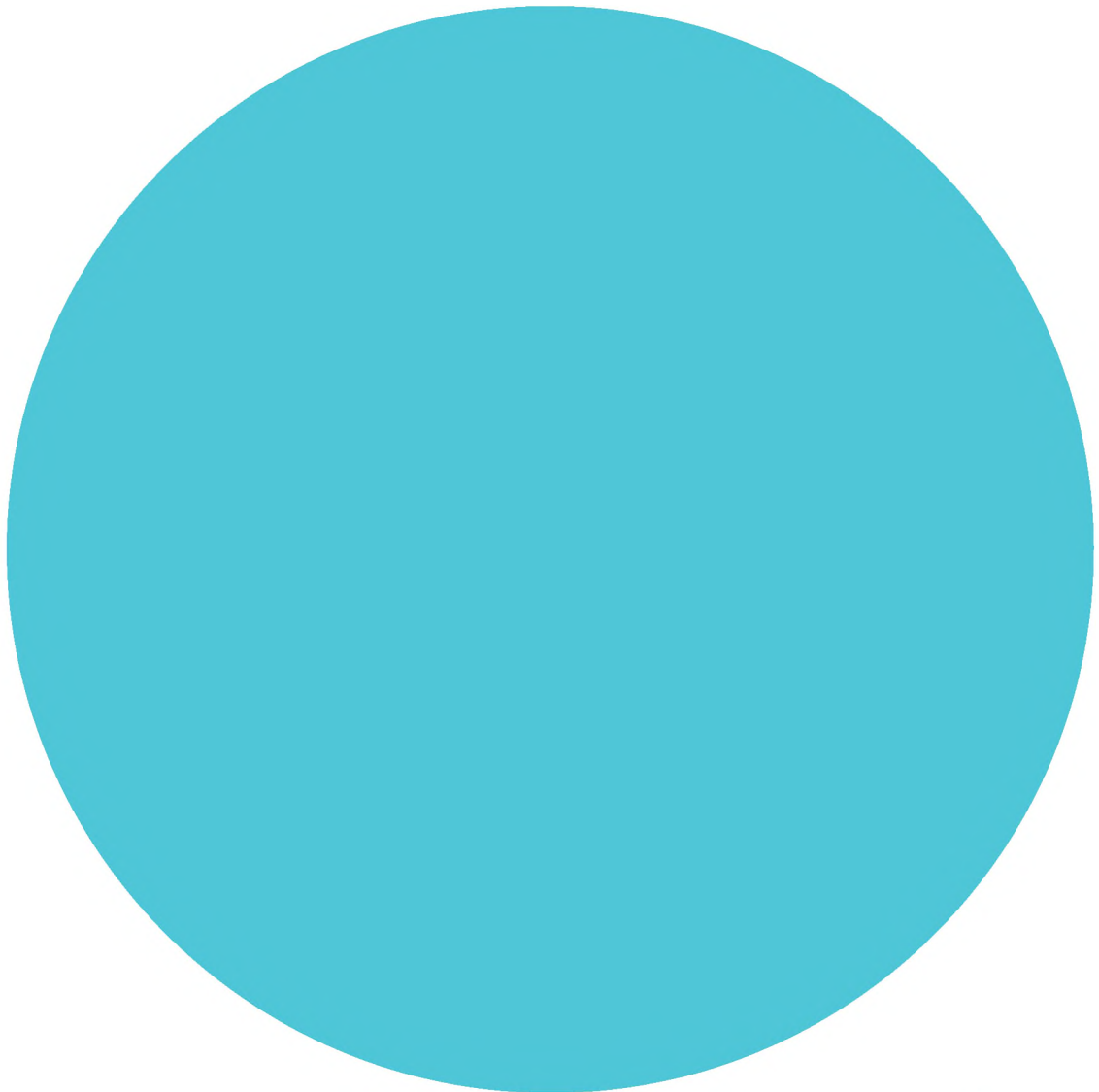


The New  
World Book of

Leo Bormans

# HAPPINESS.



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## After the disaster

‘The consecutive earthquakes in Turkey, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives, painfully reminded us of the crucial significance of resilience, helping others, and stability in finding meaning in life, and well-being,’ says positive psychologist Sefa Bulut. ‘Sometimes it is hard, but each morning when I open my eyes, I say to myself: I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today.’

Turkey woke up on February 6, 2023, to a catastrophic earthquake in Kahramanmaraş that caused massive damages and casualties in eleven cities, and Syria. Before fully understanding what had happened, a more severe earthquake occurred in the same region. The Minister of Internal Affairs made an international call for assistance at the fourth level. Both domestically and abroad, both civilian citizens and trained field workers did their best to send aid to the earthquake-stricken areas and participate in search and rescue operations. In Turkey, more than 35,355 buildings collapsed, and 50,738 people died during the earthquakes. At present, 4.1 million people have been displaced as a consequence of the earthquakes, with 1.5 million of them currently homeless.

### Sense of guilt

In most of my research, I have had a strong interest in post-traumatic stress symptoms and resilience with a particular focus on growth and well-being. Honestly, this was the most challenging experience I had faced, personally and professionally, in my entire career. Upon hearing news of the earthquakes and their intensity, people experienced shock. They were exposed to a continuous influx of information on social media, which lasted for weeks and had the potential to cause **vicarious trauma**. Many individuals immediately responded by rushing to provide

**THE INSIGHT** Life is the greatest teacher, offering numerous lessons to be learned. In the face of adversity, while potentially exposing us to traumatic events, it can also lead to the emergence of resilience and growth potential, as well as foster a sense of collective belonging and altruism.

**THE ESSENCE** Being resilient and growing together in a society to which you belong.

assistance to the affected regions, driven by a sense of community and altruism. However, among those exposed to the news, a common experience was a sense of guilt for surviving and having unaffected lives in the midst of the earthquakes’ devastation.

### Sense of belonging

The scale of the losses after the earthquakes was deeply alarming and raised significant concerns. Now is **time to heal the wounds** and to progress the recovery process in the face of post-traumatic symptoms. Currently, we are in a phase where repairing meaning, cultivating well-being, enriching psychological resilience, and fostering individual growth are of utmost importance. In this context, drawing upon my research on post-traumatic experiences and positive psychology, I am confident that positive psychology will make valuable contributions to the well-being of the survivors and individuals indirectly affected by the earthquakes.

Through my research experiences, I have consistently found that the majority of individuals possess the potential to develop and **thrive in the face of trauma**. This transformative process is influenced by factors such as chronic dysfunction, the recovery process, psychological resilience, and delayed reactions. In particular, temperament, personality structure, socio-demographic characteristics, family support, education level, self-efficacy, self-esteem,

coping strategies, problem-solving skills, spirituality, social resources, basic psychological needs satisfaction, effective interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging to the community, and finding meaning in life play a fundamental role in maintaining and enhancing well-being, as well as improving meaning in life following traumatic experiences.

### Sense of meaning

No one is immune to trauma, and people's responses during and after such events are inherently subjective. However, as researchers and practitioners, we can improve resilience, a sense of meaning in life, and the well-being of survivors and those indirectly affected. Psychology as a science, particularly positive psychology, offers comprehensive theories and interventions that can improve human capacity on the path to well-being.

I love the quote of the American actor Groucho Marx: "Each morning when I open my eyes, I say to myself: I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. I have just one day, today, and I'm going to be happy in it."

### REFLECTION

**Happiness may seem far far away especially after traumatic events; however, as human beings we have the capacity to cope with adversity and go beyond it, especially combined with social support.**

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*Yesterday is dead,  
tomorrow  
hasn't arrived yet.*

### ACTION

1. Be aware of the fact that showing a willingness to **accept the current conditions** is a life-changing step that may help to make meaning and improve well-being after traumatic events.
2. **When confronted with disasters:** keep your routine as stable as possible; seek resources to meet your needs; seek psychological help; get social support from your relatives, friends, and societal resources.
3. While it is important to reduce psychological symptoms among survivors, it is also critical to improve their resilience, well-being, and meaning in life through **evidence-based interventions**.
4. Pay special attention to **children's needs** and collaboratively work with educators to alleviate suffering and improve their well-being.
5. Implement positive psychological interventions and **positive education** in order to promote well-being among survivors and those indirectly affected.
6. Bring the effects observed to the attention of the **scientific community** and invite others to contribute to promote well-being among people who have faced extraordinary tragedies.

**Sefa Bulut** is a Professor in the Department of Counselling Psychology at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul, Turkey. He studied at Ankara University in Turkey and got his PhD at Oklahoma State University, USA. His main research interests are empirically supported positive psychological interventions and personal strengths of which people can make use in the face of adversity, particularly trauma and violence, in order to sustain meaning in life and well-being. This article is co-authored by Mustafa Subasi, who is a PhD student in psychology at HSE University.