

# THE POWER OF TRAGEDY

## CAN TRAGEDY INCREASE POWER?

**A**s the magic world of Harry Potter shows, power – the ability to be your happiest, healthiest and highest self – arises from the strangest and most unexpected places. This includes dark and difficult situations such as abuse, illness and injury – even the violent death of a loved one. Tragedies, which arrive in shocking shapes at first, can also be incredibly empowering. The worst times in life – as Harry and his friends show – can bring out the best in people and free the most important power of all: your inner psychological power.

In Harry's world, many tragic events, bad conditions and hurt things invoke power. After all, didn't a strike from a deadly serpent free Harry's courage, which called to a fabulous bird? Didn't the right magic words spoken in a cold spooky place underground shift apart stone walls, carved with snakes, to reveal a secret chamber? And didn't a wounded key – the old one with crumpled blue wings – help Harry to unlock a heavy door deep inside the heart of Hogwarts Castle? It might seem strange that misfortunes should increase our personal power. But they can – and do. Would *you* like to acquire a Philosopher's Stone in real life? Well, tragedy could help you find one.

You see, a crazy and often overlooked side to tragedy in life is its powerful flip-side. Adversity is a fierce force that bursts closed doors wide open, bringing people in touch with their true inner selves. It's only when people stare for too long at the closed doors that they miss all the other doors that tragedy has opened for them. There's no doubt about it. Big problems can free big personal powers that might otherwise stay unseen, untapped, unknown and out of our reach... forever.

Some people already know how to turn tragedy inside out, upside down and all the way around to their advantage. Tragedy might

break some people, but it sure makes others. As a wise Zen monk in Anthony de Mello's tale put it:

When my house burnt down  
I got an unobstructed view  
Of the moon at night!

So if you really want to, you can find the *best* beauty, freedom and power in the *worst* situations. Maybe *you* have suffered a tragedy. Or maybe your life has been extra tough lately. Whatever hardships you may have, there are sure ways to free your inner power.

Do you dare to explore tragedy more closely?  
Do you wish to be wiser, truer and more powerful?  
Already, here you are – a sign of true power.  
Clearly, *you* are someone destined to be powerful.  
Just like Harry Potter and his friends.

# FINDING STRENGTH IN TRAGEDY

## WHEN LIFE BEGINS BADLY

The rumour is that Lily and James Potter are – are – that they're – *dead*.

– *The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 14

**H**arry Potter's life begins with death. Harry is just one year old, and he becomes an orphan when his parents are killed by an evil wizard. In fact, much of Harry's childhood involves hard and lonely times:

- Harry has to live with his mean relatives, the Dursleys. They make Harry sleep under the stairs in a small cupboard full of spiders.
- Uncle Vernon often gets angry with Harry, taking things out on him all the time.
- Harry is frequently punished – locked up in that stair cupboard or ordered to do extra housework.
- The Dursleys exclude Harry from many family activities.
- Above all, the Dursleys never celebrate Harry's birthday.

A good way to describe Harry's life is that he is "treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly" (*Chamber of Secrets*, p. 9). Harry's future looks bleak. How can a young boy rise above such tragedy?

It may seem strange and curious, but pain, hurt and sadness in life can actually help people to grow really powerful. Problems help us to discover strengths like courage and cleverness within ourselves. As the curious wand-maker Mr Ollivander remarks: "I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter" (*The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 65). In point of fact, the bigger the problems in life, the more a person is likely to learn, grow and profit from those problems. If Harry had

not been born against the odds, if he had not experienced the hard times he did, he may never have developed the strong survival skills he did. Harry may not have made the same powerful choices that not only helped him to beat tragedy, but to rise far above it and become a powerful wizard. It is helpful to remember that if you want to be more powerful in life, the most important thing is not what happens. It's how you respond to what happens. What really, truly matters in life is how you pick yourself up when you fall.

**A tragic or difficult experience that I would like to deal well with is:**

## MAKE POWERFUL CHOICES

*Dear Mr Potter,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have a place  
at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

*– The Philosopher’s Stone, p. 42*

An important turning point in Harry’s life is when he is invited to attend a magic school. And he accepts. Harry’s choice is a huge philosophical stepping stone to power.

Harry didn’t have to go to school or learn things. Harry could have said “No!” or “Why should I?” or “Life stinks” or “We don’t need no education”. Harry could have made many excuses not to go to school which would have *blocked* his path to power.

In psychology, ‘no’ is considered to be a closed response. If not used with care, no can close a person’s best options and opportunities in life. Unhelpful ways of saying no, which can decrease your personal power and damage your health, include:

- Never trusting anyone
- Holding tightly on to grudges
- Criticising everyone all the time
- Disconnecting and withdrawing from people
- Refusing to talk about serious problems

Just check out these unhelpful nay-saying responses: “No, I don’t want anyone to help me. I might get hurt again”; “No, I’m never going out again. Something awful might happen”; “No, I don’t want to open up and talk about my problems – I trust no one”. These closed ‘no’ responses are cutting criticisms that do just that – close doors and cut off options. Saying no in these ways shuts down personal growth and empowerment. You’re basically telling your inner power to: “Shut up!”

Constantly saying “No! No! No!” can diminish your personal power so much that it ends up destroying your whole world. Just as potions master Professor Snape knows how to stopper death, saying no to everyone and everything all the time is much like putting a stopper

in life. The real tragedy in life is not how much people suffer during tough times, but how much people miss once they close their minds, shut their hearts, say no all the time and stop trying to relate to the world around them.

Harry, however, didn't say no. Despite the terrible death of his parents and a terrible time with the Dursleys, Harry did not assume that the rest of the world was terrible too. When Harry was invited to attend Hogwarts, he opened his mind and chose to accept. Power is when opportunity knocks and you answer yes. In psychology, 'yes' is considered to be an open response. It embraces open-mindedness and invites power into people's lives. When you think about it, yes keeps doors, windows, options and opportunities open. After all, fresh air, sunlight, a visit from a friend and positive energy can only enter through open doors, right? The more people open their minds and hearts, the more interesting and positive their life experiences will be.

Just look at what happened when Harry said yes to Hogwarts. Not only did Harry get to study new things at his new school, but he also travelled to new places, learned about different cultures and met other people, expanding and empowering his life experience. The great poet e.e. cummings once wrote that:

Yes is a world and  
In that world of yes  
Lie, skilfully curled, all worlds

Get it? Saying yes to one thing opens up a whole bunch of other new things, opportunities and worlds for you. At Hogwarts, Harry discovers he has a knack for flying broomsticks. Would Harry have known he could handle handles, if he hadn't said yes to Hogwarts? No wonder Professor McGonagall gets excited: "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it" (*The Philosopher's Stone*, p.112). The Sorting Hat also tells Harry: "You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head" (p. 91). Exactly! Yes is a choice that anyone's head can make. True power is not having as many material things as possible. Many rich and famous people are loaded with clothes, cars, houses and money. And many are unhappy. Check the facts out for yourself. A bitter relationship break-up here, a drug overdose or suicide attempt there, another trip to the drug rehab, or worse, a jail sentence. Power isn't having everything. Real power is making the

most of anything that comes your way. Whatever happens in our lives, everyone is free to make powerful choices. Just like Professor Dumbledore explains:

'It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.'

- *Chamber of Secrets*, p. 245

And the real world provides plenty of compelling evidence to back this up.

*Reader's Digest* books, for example, interviewed some really famous and powerful 'Yes, I can do it' people. There's movie maker Steven Spielberg who was knocked back from studying at a film school when he was a young man. Did he say "Oh no! I must be no good at producing films. This is the end of my movie-making career"? No way! Instead, Spielberg said "Yes, I can do it!" and went on to become one of the biggest movie producers of all time. Other people who became powerful because they said yes after critics told them they weren't good enough include: a successful writer who was told she couldn't write; a famous dancer who was told she was too short to dance; and a one-legged boy with cancer who grew up to break the speed barrier as an Olympic snow-ski champion - that's Michael Milton. The great scientist Albert Einstein put it this way: "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds". What I think he means is don't let boring and narrow-minded people stop you from following your dreams. Never say never - always be open to yes!

During Harry's first year at Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat (which stands for destiny outside our personal control) tells students: "I will tell you where you ought to be" (*The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 88). Harry, however, makes his own choice.

'Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.'

'Not Slytherin, eh?' said the small voice.

- *The Philosopher's Stone*, pp. 90-91

Got it? It's the choices people make about their situations, rather than the situations themselves, that determine true power. Tragedy doesn't limit power. People's reactions to tragedies do. Even rapper Eminem encourages people to have a go in life in his hit song "Lose Yourself":



You only get one shot, do not miss your chance  
This opportunity comes once in life time

Regardless of fate – however tragic – Harry is still free to make his own powerful decisions. Harry chooses to go to Hogwarts and get extra education. He chooses to join Gryffindor instead of Slytherin. He chooses good friends for himself, instead of the wrong sorts like Draco Malfoy and other thugs. To be truly powerful and overcome stresses and struggles in life, people can do anything – as long as they put their mind to it. Harry did. His friends did. And if you choose to, you can too.