

## **Study on Emotional Experience in Times of the Corona Epidemic: Many People experience Psychological Growth in the Face of Crisis**

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**Like many other countries, Germany is in the grip of the corona virus, the situation is grave. Many people fall ill, the number of deaths increases. People in medical professions, but also employees in supermarkets and elsewhere work beyond their breaking points. Countless companies and self-employed workers fear for their existence. In general, people have to learn how to live with the challenges of this special time, such as stay-at-home-orders. A flash survey among more than 1,200 people conducted by Prof. Dr. Nico Rose from International School of Management (ISM) confirms this picture. People are worried and stressed out. Yet, he also finds that many people experience a kind of psychological growth in the face of the crisis.**

“Currently, people worry much more compared to the time before the onset of the crisis, they are less cheerful and less relaxed,” says Rose. “However, this is only one side of the story. People also notice they manage to cope with really big challenges, they feel they invest more energy in important relationships, and they gain a greater sense of clarity on what is really important in their lives.” The survey also suggests people are becoming more compassionate and helpful – an impression that is corroborated by an enormous wave of solidarity among the general population and the economy in Germany. Based on Nietzsche, one could say: “What does not kill me makes me wiser”.

“Some people might feel it’s cynical to even think about positive consequences in the face of so much suffering”, the psychologist adds. “On the other hand, that’s one of the great things about human existence: We can grow – and we *do* grow in the face of crisis. Under the right circumstances, this kind of challenge bring out the best in us, and the best in society.” This phenomenon seems to be the rule more than the exception: About 70 percent of the people in the sample observe at least some signs of psychological growth, only 30 percent do not.

### **What went well: Gratitude is vital**

On average, women display more psychological growth than men – even though they currently also experience more negative and less positive emotions. However, there is one important exception: Women report they experience significantly more gratitude since the onset of the crisis. This applies to men as well, but not to the same extent. Please note: The increase in gratitude is by far the best statistical predictor of growth and resilient behavior among the factors that were investigated in this study.

“We have known for some time that gratitude can be an important key to overcoming crises and wellbeing in general,” explains Rose. “Some people intentionally focus on “what went well”, even when things seem to look really gloomy. They zero in on nurturing relationships, the support they receive (and give), and the smaller and bigger challenges they manage to defy. “Incidentally, a posture like this can be cultivated. This is part of some varieties of psychotherapy, e.g., for the treatment of depression.”

The subjective experience of growth during the corona crisis is related to other factors, including some demographic aspects: On average, people with higher incomes and a longer histories of education report slightly more signs of growth. From a statistical point of view, however, the weight of these factors clearly lags behind the role of cultivating gratitude.

### **Wellbeing is multi-dimensional**

Most people think of psychological wellbeing as a simple continuum: sometimes we feel really good, sometimes we feel bad, many days are “just fine”. However, results from the present study and previous work indicate that things are more complex. “It seems more accurate to think about the presence of wellbeing and psychological discomfort as related but somewhat independent dimensions – like a coordinate system. Consequently, people can experience psychological distress (tension, negative feelings etc.) and forms of growth (more gratitude, more clarity etc.) at the same time”, the psychologist says. “Oftentimes, this kind of positive development during or after times of crisis is not given enough attention outside of academia.”

### **Remarks on the interpretation of the study**

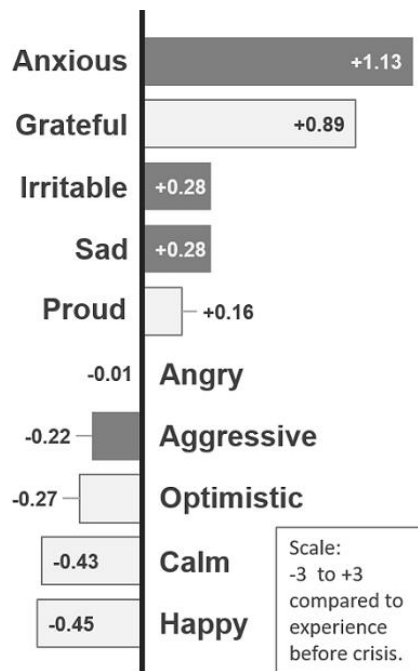
The results should be interpreted with a certain amount of caution. The information is based on participants’ answers at one point in time. Therefore, the study does not track objective changes. It reports data on peoples’ subjective experience of change when comparing their current situations to their experiences several weeks ago. Yet, it can be argued that this “felt change” is what really matters to participants’ current state of being.

Additionally, as the survey was distributed via online networks such as Twitter and LinkedIn, despite the fairly large sample it covers only a part of the German population. On average, it represents the well-educated and financially stable part of the populace. “People who are affected severely by the crisis – financially speaking – may not have had the technical capability or the energy to respond to the survey. It cannot be determined whether those people experience positive developments to the same extent”, says Rose. Against this background, it is especially important to show solidarity with people who tend to live on the fringes of society.”

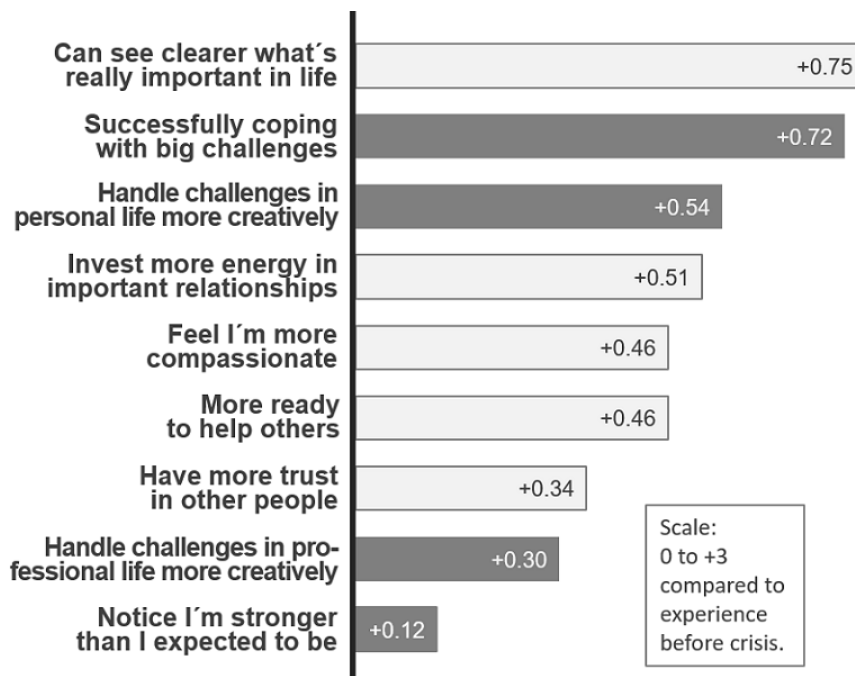
### **Source**

Nico Rose is a German psychologist. Currently, he’s a professor of organizational psychology at International School of Management (ISM) in Dortmund. From 2010-2018, he worked for Bertelsmann, Europe’s premier media group, most recently serving as VP Employer Branding & Talent Acquisition. He holds a diploma (master equivalent) in general psychology from University of Muenster, a doctoral degree in business sciences from EBS Business School, Wiesbaden, and a Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) from University of Pennsylvania.

**Figures**



Current emotional experience in comparison to the time before the "corona crisis" (n = 1.217).



Indicators of mental-emotional growth since the onset of the „corona crisis“ (n = 1.217).  
Light bars = relational domain; dark bars = domain of self-efficacy and personal strength.