# Nurturing Post-Traumatic Growth: Psychological underpinnings of Resilience

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## ABSTRACT

**Combating a life threatening illness is a skill which requires strong will power, strengths and faith. People face potentially traumatic events but there are few who remain relatively stable over time. Initial research on resilience has focused more on individual dysfunctions and psychopathological approaches. This paper represents alternatives to problem-focused approaches by highlighting psychological underpinnings of resilience. In our attempt to represent resilient outcomes we review previous research on resilience through focusing on strategies that motivate people to remain stable in the face of trauma. We later discuss role of character strengths, positive activities and self-care practices that enhance resilient outcomes following traumatic experiences.**

**Keywords: Positive activity intervention, potentially traumatic events, resilience.**

## INTRODUCTION

Resilience refers to an individual's ability to return their previous level of functioning following a traumatic event whereas benefit finding and Post Traumatic Growth occur when individuals recognize the strengths in negative experiences and demonstrate improved levels of functioning following a trauma (Bonanno, 2004) [1]. Resilience comprises a set of flexible cognitive, behavioral and emotional responses to acute or chronic adversities which can be unusual or common place (Neenan, 2008) [2]. The term resilience is defined in many ways but the most comprehensive definition of it given by Luthar as a "dynamic process consisting of series of ongoing, reciprocal transactions between a person and environment" (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker, 2000) [3]. Resilience is now more common showing heterogeneity of outcomes following aversive events most surprisingly having a stable emotional regulation. Research evidences show that some people collapse during stressful life circumstances other combat with vigor and accept it as an opportunity to growth. Why do some people accept an adversity as a challenge whereas others seem to collapse? Michael Neenan director center for Stress Management, Kent says "It is the meaning that people attach to the events and not the events themselves that determine their reactions". People react differently to the same event based upon how they rate it which underscores that there is always more than one way of looking at events, when at times it is difficult to discern any other view point than current one (Butler & Hope, 2007) [4]. Another interesting view given by Philosopher Tom Morris stating " If we live long enough and pay attention to what is going on around us we may come to understand deepest truth about life defining inner resilience, as the secret of outer result of the world [5].

Resilience is the prerequisite of positive mental health. There is ongoing debate among bereavement theorists on resilience whether it should be considered as the "Bouncing Back" mechanism. Garmezy, 1991 [6] viewed it as a bouncing back from trauma but most recent view of resilience came from the study conducted by Neenan conceptualizing it as a "returning from trauma." Neenan defined bouncing back as a rapid and effortless recovery from adversity with barely a hair out of place. Instead bouncing back emphasizes little time would be allowed for this slow process of adaptation and recovery [2]. Resilient response to adversity engages the whole person not just one aspect of it in order to face, endure, and overcome by struggle. Grotberg, 2003 [7] also described it as coming back rather than bouncing back. The review of available literature shows there has been two wave of resilience research where the first wave focused more on individual characteristics of people (e.g. personality traits and role of genetics) and second wave of research emphasized on the understanding of processes through which people are able to successfully adapt or retuned to the previous level prior to illness. This paper highlights the second wave and suggesting

that how previous studies undermined the process of positive adaptation and dominated the disease focused approaches than person focused approaches. Bonanno defined resilience more than simple recovery from insult whereas in the words of Richardson, 2002 [8] it was considered as positive growth or adaptation following periods of homeostatic disruption. However positive adaptation in response to extreme adversity was originally thought to characterize by extraordinary individuals. But later Grotberg defining the term resilience said it is not found only in certain people in fact all human beings have capacity to become resilient. People can construct their own resilience building strategies depending on their personality styles, strengths and cultural differences. Bonnano argued that because most research into trauma and loss has included only treatment seeking populations and people continue to know little about the process of resilient adaptation especially in adulthood. He considered adult resilience as an ability to maintain relatively stable level of physical and psychological functioning in the wake of traumatic experiences [1]. Several different paths may lead to resilience in adulthood describing positive adaptation may be far more common than previously believed. Bonnano's work shows surprising results and draw attention to the fact that resilience has been studied extensively by developmental researchers, bereavement theorists and mental health experts but it has received little attention in the cognitive-behavioral psychology due to long standing focus on psychopathology. Contemporary research on resilience explored new horizon such as rise of positive activity intervention, strength enhancing coaching and prophylactic techniques to build positive outlook towards suffering. Similarly proponents of positive psychology movements advocates a broader view of human potential including nurturing post traumatic growth, enhancing happiness and positive emotions, strengths and virtues, hope and mindfulness. Seligman and Csikzentmihalayi, 2000 [9] argued that in the last several decades the field of psychology has focused almost exclusively on understanding human functioning within a diseased focused medical model. Thus positive activities intervention and self-care practices may help patients to grow and remain stable in the wake of adversity or life threatening illness.

### Strategies for Building Resilience

Developing a Flexible Attitude as a Heart of Resilience as discussed earlier it is the meaning that people attach to the events hence the first step to be a resilient is developing a more flexible attitude in the wake of trauma. However adversity is determined subjectively by different individuals. A situation that is viewed as a challenge requiring gaining social support during life threatening illness can fill another person with the fear of failure believing that he will not be able to nurture relationships because of illness. It is the responsibility of mental health experts to identify what meaning people attach to an illness and how their attitude can be altered in the face of trauma.

Strategies that help a person to deal effectively with trauma include:

- Finding a support group after a traumatic event.
- Seeking out support from other people, such as friends and family members.
- Feeling good about one's own actions and strengths in the face of stressful life circumstances.
- Construing benefit in trauma and being able to act and respond effectively despite feeling fear.

### Building Resilience through Strengths

Alex Linely argues that strength approaches is self- sustaining as people like to use their best possible assets (Linely and Harrington, 2006) [10]. Researches on character strengths showed that using one's strength in the face of trauma is a mindful activity, which is better than ruminating illness. Thus working on one's character strength is more effective than working on weaknesses.

### Defining Strengths

Peterson and Seligman, 2004 [11] distinguished between talent, skill, and strength by establishing 7 criteria to define human strengths; (1) Strengths need to be manifest in a range of individual thoughts, actions or feelings; (2) strengths contribute to good life for the self and others; (3) strengths are morally valued in their own right in addition to the desirable outcomes they produce; (4) the display of strength by an individual does not diminish other people in the vicinity but rather elevates them; (5) societies provide institutions and ritual for cultivating strengths; (6) there are consensually recognized paragons of strengths; i.e., people can think of examples of virtuous individuals who seem to embody these desirable traits); (7) strengths cannot be decomposed into other strengths (e.g., tolerance meets most of the other criteria but is actually a blend of fairness and open-mindedness). Apparently aforesaid criteria presents clear rules where trained psychologists are able to systematically evaluate potential candidate strengths. A more

important thing about strengths depicts that character strengths not only supports single aspects of person rather shaping one's personality entirely. Working on strengths in traumatic situations can also have positive impact on a person as well as significant others. On the basis of in- depth research Peterson and Seligman listed 24 human character strengths. We emphasized more on the strategies that help a person to construe benefits in potentially traumatic events which help a person to develop resilient outlook towards life. Working on personal strengths can be fascinating as well as non-threatening and mindful activity which makes people's life more meaningful in the stressful life events. Thus by highlighting the psychological underpinnings of resilience our discussion focuses more on the strategies that enhance resilience through character strengths.

**Construing Benefits in Trauma and Building social support**

Construing benefits in trauma involves seeing some value or gain (a silver lining) it is a feeling that one's life has greater value or a sense of personal growth amidst trauma. Construing benefits in trauma include positive self-changes (e.g., increased empathy), changes in life priorities and goals, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2002 [12]; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1996) [13]. Research on the outcomes related to construing benefits has primarily surfaced in the adult literature. Carver and Antoni, 2004 [14] examined the long term effects of benefit finding on early stage breast cancer patients. Results indicated that people who benefited from these changes experienced a rise in psychological well- being within one year of diagnosis and predicted good Quality Of Life (QOL) at a 5-8 year follow-up. Particularly women who perceived benefits had less negative affect and fewer depressive symptoms. The role of social support as Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995 [15] explained played an important role bringing positive changes following illness. Gaining social support also plays an important role in boosting person morale in the time of stress, life threatening illness and emotional instability. Research findings confirm that there may be no better coping mechanism than sharing a personal problem with our close friends and relatives. In a classic study conducted by Landis and Umberson, 1988 [16] stated that people with strong social support are healthier and live longer. There are innumerable benefits of having a strong social support in the face of trauma. In a recent research interesting findings of cross cultural studies of three communities, Sardinians in Italy, Okinawans in Japan, and Seventh-Day Adventures in Loma-Linda, California all the communities showed having one thing in common i.e. putting their family members first and participating in more socially engaged activities (Buetnner, 2005)[17].

**Fostering curiosity**

According to Peterson, 2004 [18] patients can be helped to craft activities that offer the best possible chance to increase their innate curiosity. Fostering Curiosity through task-oriented exercises where a person can be actively engaged in work especially those are left due to illness. Such activities breathe new life into old situations by replacing the familiar and favorite tasks that can activate the client's curiosity as well as playfulness, and other strengths. For instance after a traumatic experience a person who remain unable to go at work and feel helpless can be given tasks which the person already excelled at prior to illness. Thus a small achievement after completing the tasks can fill a person with confidence, joy and help him to make more active agent. This can be especially helpful in those situations in which clients seem depressed, or cannot see clear solution to their problem. Similarly a person can be given hypothetical situations or role play session, so that a sense of empathic concern can be build. There are innumerable variations on this strategy, such as asking a client to discuss the approach to the problem that they might have taken when they were twenty years old, or asking them to imagine negotiating a situation as if they worked for a competitor [11]. Creating a playful environment and encouraging the person to think in more rational and mindful way might make new dimensions to heal the person properly. In all such instances a meaningful outcome can be derived in stressful situations which help a person to maintain homeostatic level.

**Role of Humor and Positive Emotions**

Resilience outperforms adverse circumstances through use of positive emotions and laughter (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997)[19]. In stressful life circumstances when feeling down watching a comedy film (Ruch, 1993) [20] or taking walk through park (Iwaski & Mannell, 2003) [21] actively seeking means to momentary pleasure lift people's spirits. Research by bereavement theorists suggesting that individual who exhibited genuine laughs and smiles when speaking about a recent loss had better adjustment over several years of bereavement and with more favorable responses in observers [19]. Seeking opportunities for humor is always beneficial transforming the current negative mood in a good mood. Since humor has its own world, incorporating humor in daily life has several health benefits which often increase upward spiral of happiness and positive emotions. Fredrickson, 1998 [22] described positive emotions as the ability to calm and counteract negative emotions associated with a traumatic event. Moreover Fredrickson posited that experiencing positive

emotions can lead to an upward spiral of more Subjective Well-Being. The Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions describes the role of positive emotions especially in the life threatening illness. This theory states that positive emotions broaden momentary thought-action repertoires and help to build intellectual and physiological resources for the future (Fredrickson, 2001) [23]. In evolutionary terms this contributes to greater odds of survival and reproductive success. Describing the role of positive emotions he further explained that positive and negative emotions have distinct and complementary adaptive functions and Physiological effects. Whereas negative emotions are associated with specific action tendencies that focus and narrow thoughts and actions (to prepare the body for fight or flight), positive emotions should broaden ones thoughts and actions and as a result build important personal resources [22, 23]. Indeed positive emotions are so powerful to enhance one's ability to think positively and buttressing personal resources which enable a person to work effectively in negative emotional circumstances. Research evidences supported the views that Positive emotions fuel psychological resiliency. Previous researches on positive emotions also suggest that people might improve their psychological well-being and perhaps their physical health by cultivating experiences of positive emotions at opportune moments to cope with negative emotions. Others have made similar claims that experiences of positive affect during chronic stress help people to cope effectively (Lazarus, Kanner, & Folkman, 1980 [24]; Folkman, 1997 [25]; Folkman & Moskowitz , 2000)[26]. Whereas Aspinwall described that positive affect and positive beliefs serve as resources for people coping with adversity (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997) [27]. It seems that people frequently get benefits from positive emotions especially in the stressful life events.

**Role of Savoring and Reminiscence**

Savoring is more than hedonistic feeling good. It is strength of character that a person can utilize in the face of trauma. It is more functional in nature. A person can savor life joys by living in present, noticing moment to moment changes. Research findings illustrate that savoring can act as medicine which continues to protect people psychologically over a long period of time. As discussed earlier the role of positive emotions in enhancing one's ability to deal with negative life circumstances are significant, thus there is a direct relationship between savoring and positive emotions. Savoring according to Bryant, 2003 [28] is the perceived ability to savor positive outcomes that may stem from beliefs about (a) cognitive or behavioral strategies that one can use to amplify or prolong enjoyment of positive events, (b) one's ability to anticipate future positive outcomes in ways that promote a sense of pleasure in the present, (c) one's ability to recall past positive events in ways that enhance present well-being or (d) friends or relatives who can help person to savor life joys that he can do alone. Research on savoring has explained that savoring thoughts or behaviors helps a person to "generate, intensify and prolong enjoyment (Bryant and Veroff, 2007) [29]. Savoring can have multifaceted benefits (e.g. a person can savor his/her environment by noticing the beauty of nature or appreciating the accomplishments of close friends). An intriguing analysis of Bryant's research revealed that savoring is associated with many other positive characteristics, such as people who savor their life experiences are found to be more self-confident, extraverted, more gratified, less hopeless & neurotic. Savoring not only involves present moments it also focuses on memories of past events or positive reminiscence. Reminiscence can be considered as an adaptive coping response in older adults that provides comfort (Butler, 1963) [30] reduces negative affect (Butler and Lewis, 1982) [31] and helps to resolve problems and conflicts (Coleman, 1974) [32]. The positive reminiscence is also has been implicated in people's joys. It involves calling up memories of past spent with friends and family members and personal achievement of long ago. Savoring past memories sometimes can also have opposite effects on well-being specially recalling failures and losses but research indicated savoring personal success can have emotional boost in the current mood. The advantages of savoring and reminiscing with others have empirical evidences. Pashupati and Carstensen, 2003 [33] have found that mutual reminiscence (sharing memories with other people) is accompanied by abundant positive emotions such as joy, accomplishment, amusement, contentment and pride suggesting a more positive side of reminiscence. Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005 [34] in a study conducted on young adults asked to make list of happy memories and personal mementos (such as photographs, gifts and, souvenirs) then instructed to engage in positive reminiscing twice daily for week. Results from their findings revealed that participants who reminisced on a regular basis showed considerable increase in happiness, and the more meaningful memories they conjured the greater gain in positive feelings they experienced.

**Practicing Optimism**

Seligman studied optimism extensively and described it as a wonderful human strength that people especially in the negative life circumstances can use. Research by Seligman, 1998 [35] and others suggests that optimism can be learned and it is beneficial. Savoring is associated with relishing success of past and present events whereas optimism is concerned not only appreciating past and the present but anticipating a bright future. Optimism is defined by many researchers in almost different ways. Contemporary approaches usually treat optimism as a cognitive characteristic-a

goal, an expectation, or a causal attribution- which is sensible so long as we remember that the belief in question concerns future occurrences about which individuals have strong feelings. Others characterize it as a global expectation about a positive future i.e. a belief that one's goals can be accomplished (Scheier and Carver, 1993) [36]. On the basis of how specific or small are one's positive expectations Peterson explained the functional aspects of optimism and distinguished between little optimism and big optimism. Little optimism predisposes people to behave in constructive, healthy ways in specific situations (e.g., completing the next assignment in the workplace whereas big optimism produces an overall feeling of vigor which makes people resilient, strong and energetic [18]. As it seems being optimistic is not confined to envisioning a bright picture it also motivates people to work effectively and developing a more positive outlook towards self and others.

**Practicing optimism through Best possible selves**

Recent research by King, 2001 [37] showed surprising result of visualizing best possible self and writing about life goals. In systematic intervention on college students they asked participants to spend twenty minutes writing a narrative description of their "Best Possible future self." According to King this practicing Best Possible Self exercise involves considering all such goals which they consider important and visualizing as if they are being achieved. The result of this activity showed that people who wrote about their deeply held beliefs for twenty minutes over several days relative to control groups who wrote about others goals were more likely to show a sharp increase in their current mood (i.e. positive mood) to be happier several weeks later with fewer complaints of physical illness [37] Why should a mental image of events or physical stimulus be able to exert such effects? Research seems to indicate that the cognitive processes underlying the generation, manipulation and scanning of mental images closely mirror the processes involved in perceiving actual physical stimuli (Kosslyn, 1994) [38]. Studies using brain-imaging techniques, for example, indicate that areas of the brain known to be involved in visual processing are also active during visual imagery tasks (Farah, 1988) [39]. In more recent analysis Lyubomirsky and Sheldon, 2006 [40] replicated research and found the same result with positive lift in participant's mood. People who tried this activity later reported it motivating, relevant to their current lives, and easy to relate to. They appeared to enjoy visualizing reaching to their future goals. People found that this activity was not just imagining a bright future rather it was more about building a best possible self today which can make their future come true. Since writing enabled them to recognize that it was in their power to transform themselves and to work toward goals that they valued most.

A close scrutiny of writing the life goals suggest that writing is highly structured, systematic and rule-bound, it prompts an individual to organize, integrate and analyze thoughts in a way that would be different from thinking Pennebaker and Graybeal, 2001 [41]. Writing about goals help people to put their thoughts together in a coherent manner, allowing them to find meaning in their life experiences, it also gives people an opportunity to learn about themselves (e.g. their priorities, emotions, and their motives) and who they really are and what is in their heart [40]. According to this view people can work with a feeling of control and help to recognize and reduce conflict among their goals and the obstacles that might stand in their way. Practicing optimism following an adversity has many advantages (e.g. boosting happiness, gives meaning, and buttress resilience). There is a great deal of evidences which show that people who are optimists routinely maintain high levels of well-being and mental health during stressful life situations [36]. Furthermore optimists have good coping skills and are action oriented. They do not collapse in adverse situations nor do they ruminate on negative events.

**The Role Tragic Optimism and Meaningful life by Victor Frankel**

Frankel, 1984 [42] defined Tragic Optimism as a situation in which one is and remains optimistic in spite of tragic triad, as the triad which consists of those aspects of human life which may be circumscribed by (1) pain (2) guilt (3) death. Is it really possible to remain stable in spite of all misery? Frankel presupposed that life remain potentially meaningful under any condition even those which are most miserable. He considered the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive. Frankel furthermore redefined the word "Best" through which he derived the notion of tragic optimism as an ability in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best always allows for (a) turning human suffering into human achievement and accomplishment; (b) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for better; and (c) deriving from life's suffering an incentive to take responsible action. Frankel who survived in the concentration camp was an epitome of resilient and the one who used his personal strengths successfully during the most traumatic situations of his life in Auschwitz. He emphasized "Happiness cannot be pursued it must ensue". One must have reason to be happy. Once the reason is found, however one becomes automatically happy. He suggested that a person can learn optimism in the face of trauma through a meaningful life. Finding a meaningful life was one of the main aims of the logo therapy. As his logo therapy teaches three vital

avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work by doing a deed. The second by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words meaning can be found not only in work but also in love. Most important as Frankel considered is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation facing a fate that he cannot change may rise above himself and by so doing transform himself. The person may turn a personal tragedy into triumph (p.170). Thus rather than being sad it is better to move and find a meaningful life. People should remember that they have possibilities in the future as well as realities in the past such as the potentials they have actualized, the meanings they have fulfilled, the values they have realized where nobody can remove these assets from the past.

A traumatic event, like a serious illness, death of a family member, an expected loss of status or employment, or being a victim of crime can break person entirely. The person can lose his sense of belongingness. As Bulman, 1992 [43] described in "Shattered assumptions" following an adversity a person gains an understanding of the trauma and of its implications. Thus it is not just construing benefits in the face of trauma that helps a person to combat with an stressful situation rather interpreting an adverse situation in a rational manner can motivate a person to become normal again. Recent research provided most surprising results showing that people who reported finding some meaning to loss showed fewer symptoms of negative emotions, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders following a year [12].

### Mindfulness In the face of Trauma

Kabat-Zinn defined Mindfulness as the awareness "with the aim of helping people live each moment of their lives- even the most painful ones as fully as possible". Mindfulness may be performed in different ways that a person can achieve during continuous practice. Such as (a) Being Non- judgmental: Observing the present moment impartially with detachment and without evaluation (b) Being Trusting: Trust yourself and others and having a sense of trust that things will be better in future (c) Being Open: Pay attention to moment to moment things as if the person is seeing for the first time (d) Developing a Free will: Getting oneself connected to the sense and nature and free from ruminations. Recently growing number of researches in the area of mental health have been shown that Mindfulness is currently being used in all spheres (i.e. from psychoanalysis to CBT). Kabat-Zinn, 1990 [44] recognized that cultivating awareness through mindfulness could be therapeutic and developed 8-week group Intervention called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training. Mindfulness based techniques sometimes used with the combination of yoga and body scan. Kabat-Zinn's center (Massachusetts) has reported successful outcomes in reducing stress of more than 17,000 patients through MBSR (Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, 2008) [45]. Which is remarkable in the field of cognitive and behavior psychology and self-care helping people to fight with negative effects of stress and promoting resilient outcomes. Research evidences by Shapiro, Schwartz, and Santerre, 2002 [46] showed that MBSR training with medical and pre-medical students resulted in sharp reduction in anxiety and depression as well as increase level of empathy. In a very recent quantitative analysis revealed that as compared to cohort control group counseling students undergoing MBSR training reported a significant decrease in stress, negative emotions, rumination, state and trait anxiety, and significant increase in positive emotions and self- compassion [46]. As these researches show comprehensive accounts of benefits of MBSR training. The mindfulness based stress reduction training can also be used across all ages. Mindful meditation has several advantages engaging a person's mind and body in a coherent form through concentrating on the patterns of thoughts, emotions and breathing. Thus with regular practice a person can be trained and keep himself calm and maintain homeostatic level. Other meditative practices such as Zen Meditation, Transcendental Meditation and Vipassana meditation can help people to attend their inner world and develop insight. According to Shapiro the essence that lies in all these activities is "cultivating attention".

### Suggestion for Future Studies

As this article represents a model to foster resilient outcomes but has some limitations. The issues related to individual differences cannot be ignored such as Trait Resilience- the general tendency to modify one's responses effectively to change situational demands, and by having the ability to recover effectively from stressful life circumstances (Block and Block, 1980) [47]. Furthermore relationship of resilience to Personality (e.g. extraversion and conscientiousness having a positive relationship with resilience) and coping styles (i.e. task-oriented coping has been shown to promote effective recovery from many types of stressful situations (Penley, Tomaka, and Wiebe, 2002) [48]. Thus the future research needs to explore more on resilience especially in terms of personality traits. Future research can also use these strategies with non-clinical populations (e.g. parents of autistic children and other psychotic disorders) and with people facing life threatening illness such as cancer, AIDS etc.

## Conclusions

We outlines several key principles necessary to build resilience through using positive activities and character strengths such as curiosity, optimism, social support and emotional regulation (broaden-build theory). Since the primary motive of this paper is to represent comprehensive model to enhance resilient outcomes in the face of potentially traumatic events so that a more positive view of human resilience can be framed. But unfortunately there are little research evidences which address issues related to personal growth providing opportunities with more comprehensive self-care practices and intervention programs as in the words of Bickley, 1998 [49] self-care is crucial for all people in everyday life. Its role is significant in promoting good health and well-being. Hence it is necessary to continuously monitor those intervention strategies which could aid people especially in traumatic situations. It can also conclude that transforming a person into a resilient individual is not a result of few determining factors rather resilience is the result of multiple factors. We furthermore propose that resilient outcomes have several advantages making people prepare in wake of negative stressful life events such as being optimistic in spite of trauma or practicing mindfulness to remain stable in emotional disturbances as well as under normal circumstances. Whereas developing a sense of curiosity and savoring give people a purpose on the one hand and motivates them to return from adversity on the other. Practicing these activities also help to develop a sense of hardiness in life enable them to use active coping and find social support and construe benefits amidst trauma.

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