

Escape from the past

Boris Cyrulnik lost his mother and father in the Holocaust. But childhood trauma needn't be a burden, he argues - it can be the making of us. And he's proved it by helping countless others to acquire resilience.

[By Viv Groskop \(The Guardian\)](#)

Boris Cyrulnik's parents were murdered by the Nazis when he was seven, and he grew up in France without siblings or other relatives. He was himself arrested, but escaped by hiding in a synagogue, then worked as a farm labourer until the war was over, whereupon he was put into care. He considers his survival, and present-day eminence, a miracle.

[...] In France, Cyrulnik is revered for his work on overcoming childhood trauma and helping heal the wounds left on the country by the second world war. I met him to talk about his book **Resilience**, published for the first time in English this month.

This fascinating and revolutionary book argues that suffering, however appalling, can be the making of somebody rather than their destruction - and that even children who appear to be beyond help can be saved.

In 1944, Cyrulnik's parents, who were Jewish, were taken to Auschwitz, where they perished. The night before his mother was taken, she had him fostered - but the new "family" betrayed him to the authorities almost immediately. He was arrested [...]

As a child, Cyrulnik could not understand what was happening and there was no adult around to explain what was really going on, so it did not affect him deeply until long afterwards. This gives a hint of the "resilience" his book describes - the capacity to turn a terrible situation into something useful. While imprisoned in a synagogue in Bordeaux, Cyrulnik managed to hide in the ceiling. It was assumed he had escaped. He stayed hidden for several days before running away and finding work on farms before eventually going into care at the age of 10.

After the war, when he tried to tell people what had happened to him, they wouldn't believe or want to hear it. "Nine out of 10 Jewish children were killed. You didn't talk about it. It was difficult to say these things - it made me feel like a monster. People didn't believe me. It cut me in half. One part of my personality had friends and played football. The other half was silently suffering. "It was very English in a way," he jokes. "Never complain, never explain" [...].

Cyrulnik threw himself into his studies, eventually taking up medicine at the University of Paris. [...]

Cyrulnik soon realised he wanted to be a psychoanalyst. It was only at this point that he was able to re-evaluate his own life, experiencing what he calls "la rage de comprendre" - the passion to understand the past that he considers a healthy, positive reaction. Instead of feeling, as before, isolated and "monstrous", he suddenly felt closer to others and fascinated to understand what it means to be human.

He realised he could apply his own experience to that of other people. [...]

Resilience is about abandoning the imprint of the past."

Many of his ideas are informed by Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund and one of the first to research the deprivation of parental care. Cyrulnik also describes himself as a disciple of John Bowlby, the British psychiatrist who pioneered attachment theory, which emphasises the importance of an attachment figure for babies. "This figure can be a man or a woman. Men make very good mothers - seriously," he says, with a laugh.

[...] The most important thing to note about his work, he says, is that resilience is not a character trait: people are not born more, or less, resilient than others. As he writes: "Resilience is a mesh [*rete*], not a substance. We are forced to knit ourselves, using the people and things we meet in our emotional and social environments. [...]"

Attachment - Bowlby's prescription - and affection help develop the resilience factor, he says. "We know that affection gives children confidence and then, when something bad happens to them, they can get better."

Even if a child has suffered a lot, he says, the human brain is malleable and can recover. "Brain scans show that traumatised children can heal. In the right conditions, the brain returns to normal within a year."

[...] No child is doomed by their past, Cyrulnik says. His motto, well-known in France, is: "A person should never be reduced to his or her trauma."

In so-called "normal" family life, if such a thing really exists, he has one area of concern. Whereas he is appalled that, within living memory, people still thought it was acceptable to inflict physical punishment on children, he is equally worried about doing damage by allowing the child to be the centre of the universe. "We have done a lot of work on children who are 'over-invested'," he says. Some parents who have been hurt in childhood let their children do what they want. These children develop badly. **"Over-investment is a form of impoverishment in itself, because it ends up that the child is only supposed to love one person - this self-sacrificing, all-permitting parent. This is a prison for the child."**

But Cyrulnik is refreshingly wary of demonising parents, because the wider social context is important. **"What is best for children is when they are brought up by a community, like in the African saying: 'It takes a village.'"**

He has said in the past that he sees empathy as the cornerstone of humanity and believes that this is instinctive: "[The ability] to put yourself in the place of another is probably the foundation of morality."

He is fascinated by **the paradox of wealth, especially in the consumerist west:** the richer a society becomes, the more unhappy its people. "It is not easy to have a family life in a rich country. Wealth fragments family life because people can travel in a way they can't in poor countries. Poverty is a barrier to many things, but it gives solidarity to family life. In modern life, the personality can flower, but we hold our families less dear."

This is why Cyrulnik is not especially pessimistic about the current global crisis: "Young people will rediscover the importance of family life and it will renew the family."

"It's a miracle that I have this family," he says, his eyes twinkling. "It was my dream as a teenager. I remember dreaming about all the things I wanted. [...] If I have friends and family, I will be completely overwhelmed. And this is what happened to me. It's not easy to achieve that happiness in the modern world, but I have."