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# THE VIABILITY OF PERSONALITY IN A PSYCHOTRAUMATIC ENVIRONMENT

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### *Abstract*

The problem of psychotraumatizing and its implications for further personal development is being raised more often in recent years. Psychological trauma is a specific class of critical life-changing events. Researchers are interested in the question of how the psychological traumatic impact on the personality occurs and how it is possible to minimize the long-term consequences of psychotraumatization. Many factors contribute to reducing the risks of personal dysfunction in adulthood after experiencing childhood trauma. Allocate external and internal resources and mechanisms to survive during and after traumatic circumstances. The article is devoted to the study of survival mechanisms in traumatic situations. The presence of a sufficient number of survival mechanisms determines the viability (ability to survive) of the individual. Viability was first discussed in the 70s of the 20th century, during this period the term "invulnerable child" appeared. This expression has been used to explain the survival of children and adolescents in psychotraumatic adverse conditions. Later, the term "invulnerability" was replaced by a broader concept of "viability", which expressed the ability of the individual to independent existence, development and survival. This article discusses the constructive and destructive mechanisms of survival in a traumatic environment, which have been used by different generations. The paper presents the results of a study conducted in June 2019.

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**Keywords:** Viability, survival mechanisms, the negative effects of psychotraumatizing, psychological trauma, psychologically traumatic situation.



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of studies devoted to the study of psychological trauma and its consequences has increased. Scientists consider the impact of trauma on personality, look for patterns of individual human response to trauma, consider risk factors and protective factors that affect the intensity of the effects of psychotraumatizing. Researchers have always been interested in the question of how the psychotrauma of the past affect the personality of an adult (Petrova, 2014). In our work we consider one of the aspects of this problem, namely, what helps to overcome the destructive impact of psychotrauma, what survival mechanisms used by people to overcome psychotraumatic situations are effective to reduce the intensity of the adverse effects of trauma. In other words, what mechanisms increase the level of vitality of the individual.

Researchers identify factors that influence the reaction strength and the damage degree during the experience of psychotrauma (Cherepanova, 2010; Gavrilova & Aleksandrov, 2015).

First of all, the intensity of the consequences depends on the specifics of the event, while the reaction of a person to a traumatic event depends on an additional number of external and internal factors:

External:

- *everything that the environment can provide us with in terms of potential protection (real or illusory);*

- *life circumstances at the time of a traumatic event;*

- *past experience (negative or positive);*

Internal:

- *individual physiological features;*

- *level of learning ability;*

- *individually experienced sense of the ability to withstand danger (resilience);*

- *psychological attitudes;*

- *instinctive reactions*, known as natural action plans, which are a deep and integral part of our body (Almaev, Dorodnev, & Malkova, 2009; Reshetnikov, 2006).

The combination of these factors forms a variety of survival mechanisms, and this variety affects the level of viability.

Viability refers to the individual's ability to manage their resources in the context of life situations of varying degrees of complexity (Mahnach, 2007). At the same time, the viability of the individual can change throughout life, since at every moment of his life a person can be in a more or less resource state (Laktionova, 2010). Nevertheless, we believe that it is a wide variety of survival mechanisms that forms a high level of viability of the individual. Survival mechanisms can be both constructive and destructive. Very often, destructive survival mechanisms are painkillers, or means of distraction from the problem, which is why they are often used both at the time of occurrence of traumatic events, and after them to relieve the painful consequences.

## **2. Problem Statement**

We believe that the level of viability (survival) of a person can determine the success of overcoming a traumatic situation and minimize the consequences of its influence.

Thus survival can be provided both constructive (healthy) mechanisms, and destructive mechanisms (destroying the personality). Thus, if we accept the hypothesis that a wide variety of survival mechanisms determines the level of viability, then in the future it will be possible to create preventive programs, during the implementation of which it will be possible to form constructive mechanisms of personality, and thus increase the level of viability. The task of our study is to examine in detail the mechanisms of survival (constructive and destructive), which were used by different generations to overcome the consequences of traumatic events.

## **3. Research Questions**

**3.1.** What are the main survival mechanisms used in Russia during the 20th century?

**3.2.** Are there any differences between the major survival mechanisms among representatives of different generations and genders?

**3.3.** What is the percentage of constructive and destructive survival mechanisms in a traumatic environment?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

In our article we will analyze the data of the study, which examined the survival mechanisms of Russian people for three generations. We intend to summarize the data and identify the main blocks of these mechanisms, to identify typical ways of survival for representatives of different genders and different generations.

## **5. Research Methods**

In our study, we used two techniques.

The first technique was used to investigate the presence of childhood injuries: “Adverse childhood experience” (ACE). The questionnaire is international and is designed to measure negative childhood experiences and identify the relationship between negative experiences and the risk of problem behavior in later life. The questionnaire is designed to study people aged 18 years and older. The issues cover family dysfunction; physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect by parents or guardians.

The questionnaire proposes to assess the presence in the first 18 years of life of various types of traumatic events:

- verbal violence (threats, insults);
- physical violence (beatings);
- sexual violence;
- the lack of a sense of security, care;
- experience of deprivation;

- parents' divorce;
- domestic violence;
- use of psychoactive substances by family members;
- mental illness of a family member;
- imprisonment of a family member.

The second technique is a semi-standardized interview with each of the participants, with the help of which we identified the survival mechanisms in traumatic situations, which were used by the study participants and their close relatives.

Parents, grandparents, spouses were studied as close relatives. The main interview question was: “What helped you and your relatives survive in traumatic situations?” The interview took place in the form of a conversation with the fixation of the information received on a special form. The methods of survival, obtained during the interview, were generalized into enlarged groups.

We have identified groups of external and internal survival mechanisms. This division is conditional, since any human behavior is determined by internal impulses, but, nevertheless, the sources that a person uses for survival can be divided into these two groups.

*External survival sources:*

- self-development (Hobbies, creativity, art, nature, books, interests, studies);
- support of close people (family, friends, community);
- household employment (work, housekeeping, vegetable garden);
- addictions, as the use of external objects of anesthesia (alcoholism, codependency, nicotine addiction, shopping addiction, gambling, sex addiction, etc.)

*Internal survival sources:*

- resource personality traits (optimism, trust, responsibility, love of life, hope, sense of humor);
- negative personality traits (suspicion, distrust, closeness, narcissism, infantilism, imperiousness);
- spirituality (belief in a higher power, creative values, meaningfulness of existence);
- destructive behavior (active and passive aggression, control, the role of the offender, suicide, infidelity).

In total, the study involved 30 participants (men and women), from 28 to 70 years.

## **6. Findings**

At the beginning of the study, we conducted a questionnaire “Adverse Childhood Experience”. The Table 01 shows the intensity of trauma. The intensity of the traumatization – is the total number of the psychological trauma experienced during childhood. The maximum possible amount of psychological trauma on this questionnaire is 10.

**Table 01.** Amount of psychotraumatic events of study participants (percentage)

Amount of psychological traumas	% of participants
0	3.5
1	6.7
2	13.3
3	19.9
4	9.9
5	13.3
6	13.3
7	6.7
8	3.5
9	9.9
10	0

The number of traumas of childhood equals 4 and more, according to international standards, is considered the most traumatic for the individual. This category of people has a high risk of such consequences as the formation of addictions; antisocial lifestyle; criminal and administrative offenses, and as a consequence, imprisonment; early death. According to studies in the United States and Europe, 75% of the study participants have from 0 to 5 psychotraumas. In our study, 56.6% of the participants have the number of 4 traumas or more. This is an extremely high level of traumatization, in which there is a high risk of a violation of the individual adaptation in society. At the same time, all the participants of the study were successfully socialized, did not have clearly manifested destructive behaviors. This fact indicates a high level of their viability.

Next, we analyzed which childhood traumatic events are most common in our culture. In Table 02 you can see the representation of different types of psychotrauma in the group of the respondents.

**Table 02.** The types of psychoraumatic events of the study respondents (in %)

Types of psychological traumas	% of the participants
Verbal violence	76
Physical violence	40
Sexual violence	50
Lack of security sense	69
Deprivation	30
Parents' divorce	40
Domestic violence	17
Use of psychoactive substances by a family member	56
Mental illness of a family member	53
Imprisonment of a family member	10

In the first place there is verbal violence, this form of trauma is experienced by 76% of the participants, in the second place there is the lack of a sense of security-69% of the participants. The lack of protection is expressed in the lack of support, coldness of parents, and inconsistency in relationships. In such conditions, the child feels his own uselessness and rejection by significant adults. In the third place is the psychoactive substances addiction of one or more family members. 56% of the study participants were brought up in such families.

The task of a man is to adapt to the environment and survive by interacting with it. For adaptation, a person uses various mechanisms that are designed to reduce the intensity of painful experiences, adjust their behavior and thinking to changing situations, distract from events, etc. All this can be done in both constructive (healthy) and destructive ways. Society offers a huge variety of survival mechanisms, and the person chooses them, according to the family model, life experience, level of development, value system, personal characteristics, etc.

In our study, during a semi-standardized interview, we decided to examine what survival mechanisms were used by the study participants themselves and their close relatives of different generations. All the mechanisms of survival we have divided into constructive and destructive. The results are presented in raw scores (number of mentions) in Tables 03 and 04.

**Table 03.** Constructive survival mechanisms of different generations' respondents (sum of points)

Constructive survival mechanisms	1900-1945		1946-1970		1971-1990	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Self-development	31	31	38	34	28	68
Support of relatives	23	53	6	15	15	28
Household employment	22	51	10	35	15	25
Resourceful personality traits	22	26	9	17	10	24
Spirituality	38	19	4	8	16	30

First, let us consider the constructive survival mechanisms. As we can see, such a mechanism as “self-development” is used more often by women over time. “Support of relatives”, “household employment” and “reliance on resourceful personality traits” as survival mechanisms were used less, compared to the older generation. The mechanism of “spirituality” was often used by people born in the period from 1900 to 1945, then the frequency of use has decreased dramatically, but the current generation is again actively turning to the spiritual aspects of life.

Mechanisms that differ most in frequency of use in men and women:

- self-development (people born from 1970 to 1990);
- support of close people (people born from 1900 to 1945);
- household employment (in all three generations).

Further, let us consider what destructive survival mechanisms the study participants and their relatives have been using (table 04).

**Table 04.** Destructive survival mechanisms of respondents of different generations (sum of points)

Destructive survival mechanisms	1900-1945		1946-1970		1971-1990	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Dependent behaviour	4	9	25	3	29	16
Destructive behaviour	23	23	13	13	12	19
Negative personality traits	9	26	19	29	36	44

According to the results, we see that there is a dangerous tendency to increase the frequency of destructive survival mechanisms use. Mechanisms of “use of dependent behavior” and “formation of negative personality traits” are growing, both for men and women. In the generation born in 1946-1970 number of women, using dependent behavior, is extremely small compared to men, in the generation 1971-1990 their number has increased significantly.

Thus, we see that the use of “self-development” has grown out of constructive mechanisms over time, which is associated with the development of society and the great opportunities that society provides. At the same time, destructive mechanisms demonstrate either stable trends or growth. This is a dangerous trend, which indicates a change in priorities and values in society.

## 7. Conclusion

Summing it up, we can speak about the highest level of children's traumatization of the group studied. At the same time, analyzing their social situation and psychological state at the present time, we can testify to a fairly successful overcoming of the traumatic events consequences. Their level of vitality is quite high, because it allowed them to resist personal destruction and build their lives in spite of the difficulties experienced. We believe that a wide variety of survival mechanisms has contributed to their positive development in a difficult life situation. In the course of the analysis of the obtained data, we considered the difference in the survival mechanisms of different generations, the specifics of the mechanisms using by men and women and revealed the tendency of growth of destructive survival mechanisms, which causes serious concerns. The obtained results can be the basis for a more detailed study of viability and its relationship to the variety of survival mechanisms.

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