

# EVERYTHING HAPPENS for a reason, doesn't it?

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DR. BOB BAUGHER

Everything happens for a reason. We hear it all the time. I have been hearing it for years from my psychology students. Part of my job as their instructor is to teach them the art of critical thinking. Yet, when my students get involved in a discussion especially of a senseless tragedy, inevitably many of them say with conviction, "Well, I believe everything happens for a reason," usually followed by an uplifted shoulder shrug.

In my field of work as a death educator and former counselor, I've met thousands of people who have experienced all kinds of tragedies. What follows is a beginning list of people, some of whom I've met over the years. For years I have challenged my everything-happens-for-a-reason students to look into the eyes of any of these people and tell them why their tragedy took place in their life:

- ◆ A fellow college instructor and his wife find their seven-month-old baby dead in his crib: SIDS. Was their son *supposed* to die from SIDS before his 8<sup>th</sup> month of life?
- ◆ The brother of a woman I know stabbed his parents to death. For what possible reason did this tragedy hit this family?
- ◆ My friend's mother walked into the ocean and drowned herself. The suicide makes my friend too paranoid to let her own children out of her sight. Was her mother's suicide and her ensuing paranoia my friend's destiny?
- ◆ My father had a massive stroke at 52, almost died, lost his lifetime dream of running his record shop full time, and was never able to use the fingers of his left hand again. If there was a reason for this, please tell me what it possibly could have been.
- ◆ A 17-year-old boy is shot in the head. He is an only child. Was there a reason his parents were to become childless?
- ◆ An 18-year-old woman has a son who is stillborn. Was it for the best?
- ◆ A 20-year-old man joined the National Guard and died driving a truck in a war zone. The other soldiers lived. Was this family supposed to lose a son in war?

## QUESTIONS

If, like many of my students, you believe that everything happens for a reason, then you should have had no problem with the examples you just read. You easily skimmed over each tragedy saying things such as, “Yup, there’s a reason for that. That one, too. Hmm, yes, all these.”

However, I have a number of questions about your belief:

1. Is there a reason for *every single event* that happens to every person on earth?
2. If only *some* things happen for a reason, then what proportion of tragedies have a reason? 90%? 50%? 10%? If half of the people in the examples above were in the “happened for a reason” group, then why did the other half experience their tragedy? Can we ever tell the difference between the things that were *supposed* to happen for a reason and those things that happen for *no* reason?
3. Whose “reason” is it? Some people believe that God controls all the good and bad that happen in their life. So, if you get hit by a truck (bad) and then get a big cash settlement (good), Did God make both things happen? Or perhaps God couldn’t prevent the accident, but did intervene with the money part. So, what is your answer? Does God cause absolutely everything, some things, or nothing?
4. If it’s not God, then where does this reason thing come from? Perhaps the answer lies in our destiny—the belief that your future has already been laid out. So, when good or bad happens to you, that’s what was supposed to happen. It was your fate. You win the lottery? You were destined. You have cancer? You were destined.
5. Another possibility is that there is some cosmic plan (other than one orchestrated by God) in which events happen in a way that fits into a cohesive whole where everything eventually comes out balanced. Therein lies the “reason:” it’s part of our plight as humans on planet earth to live out this cosmic plan.
6. Of course there is the argument that goes, “what goes around, comes around.” You cheated, lied, caused people pain? Bad things will follow. Just wait. After all, why else would these tragedies occur? You brought it on yourself. This explanation makes it convenient for people to blame us when negative events occur in our lives.

A concept in psychology is what we call the Just-World hypothesis. It begins with the belief that the world is a fair place. So, when a tragedy occurs, we ask, “What could that person have done to bring the tragedy onto him (or her).”

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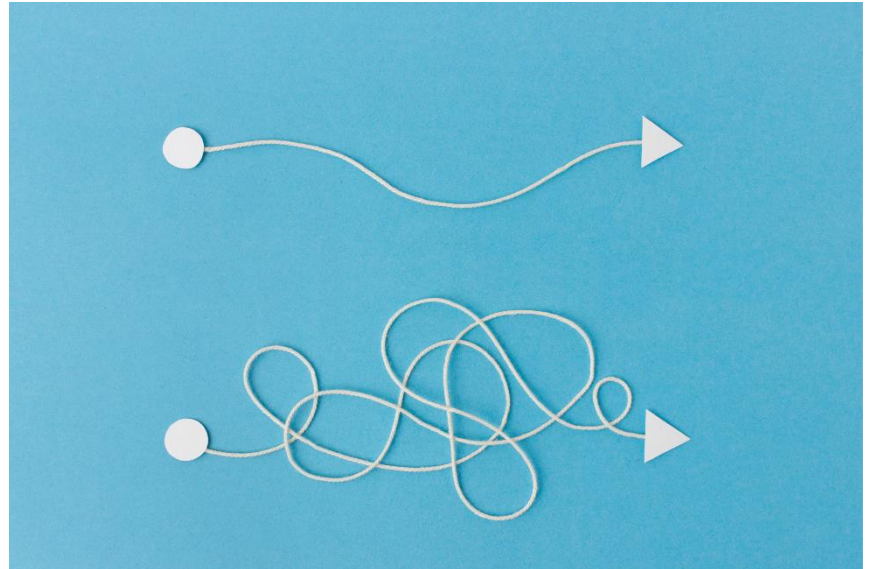
In essence, we blame the victim. So, our reason is,  
“She brought on herself.”

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### OR IS CHAOS THE ANSWER?

Here's a radical idea: What if absolutely *nothing* happens for a reason? What if life is random? What if all of the trillions of big and little things that happened to us and the rest of the nearly eight billion earth inhabitants happened for no reason? How would our minds handle such a chaotic world?

Our brains are wired to make sense of the vast array of stimuli that bombard our senses daily. When something is senseless, our brain struggles to give it meaning.



For example, try this child's riddle by saying this aloud: "oh-wah tah-goo sigh-am."

This will remain senseless to your brain until you work on it by saying it aloud a few times—and then voilà—there it is.

When our brain experiences a tragedy such as the ones listed earlier, it quickly searches for meaning—much like you did with the riddle. For the majority of us, our brains cannot tolerate the total irrationality of these tragedies. However, when we conclude that *everything happens for a reason*, our brain can take comfort in the belief that the senseless now makes at least some sense.

In case you haven't yet deciphered the child's rhyme, it's likely your brain is still coming back to it even as you read these words. If this is true for you, it is yet another example of how our brain is wired to make sense of the world—whether it is a silly word game or something much larger.

If you believe everything happens for a reason, would you then give up when a tragedy happened to you?

I believe that the majority of people who've been struck by tragedy rise up from it. I don't mean they get over it or totally heal from it. And it's not like they wished it on themselves. But, as AIDS spokesperson Ryan White stated a couple years before he died at age 18:

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Since this is the way the hand was dealt,  
I decided to live the best way I can.

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I don't believe that there was *a reason* Ryan was one of the 10,000 out of 20,000 hemophiliacs who became HIV-positive in the early 1980s. But, once he realized what it meant to be a person with AIDS, he stood tall and took the high road.

While some may conclude that there must have been some reason that it was Ryan who got the virus (so he could be the spokesperson), it is entirely possible that, once people are hit with a tragedy, they often find a way to cope with it. Let's look.

People who survive traumatic life-changing events report that they get up the next day whether they like it or not.

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For many of them, going on with life  
is the last thing they wanted.

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Bereaved parents and widowed people have told me time and again that people they meet say, "I don't know how I could survive if that happened to me."

The response that most bereaved people want to give goes something like this:

"You think I'm strong? I have no other choice (except in the case of taking my own life) but to get up each day. Moreover, I just can't believe that the world continues to turn, that people drive their cars, shop, go to work, mow their lawns and go on with their lives."

When people look back at horrendous events in their lives, their brains demand some explanation. Some find a reason. Others search a lifetime and never do. But the majority forge on.

What does this mean in our daily lives? I believe that we take the easy way out when we conclude that there is a reason behind all, most, or even some events. When we see a tragedy on the news and the reporter ends the story with "...he was in the wrong place at the wrong time," we say to ourselves, "So *that's* the reason for this terrible event. He shouldn't have *been* at that place at that time."

To me, it is tantamount to blaming the victim: You were wrong to be in that place and you were wrong for being there at that time. But in believing in this wrong-place-wrong-time scenario, our brain can then rest assured that some sense has been made of the senseless.

Instead, I have a challenge for you. For a week, if you're not doing this already, see if you can take the position that tragedies are random, senseless, and pointless. See how your brain can handle a world where there are no reasons, but simply events occurring just because they do—a world where horrendous things can happen to me and to you. Yes, me *and* you. And if and when they do happen to you and me, it will be up to us to decide how we will handle them.

Will you give in to your brain's demand for a reason? It's up to you.

By the way, if you've still not figured out the riddle, well, there must be a good reason for it.