

Building Resiliency

By Nancy Green

The popular 2011 song title, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” was actually borrowed from a similar quote by 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It’s a catchy phrase and perhaps a catchier song, but there’s no evidence that it’s true.

In fact, how one recovers from trauma is complicated. It may cause some people to experience life-long debilitating distress, and yet others find a way to thrive. Those who successfully overcome trauma are often known as resilient people. In recent years, the traits of resilient people, along with how to build those traits, have received a lot of attention. After two years of Covid, it certainly seems like a good topic for conversation.

Traumatic experiences can run the gamut from a one-time horrific incident to a life-time of suffering. While it is difficult to generalize, psychologists believe that continuous stress and trauma can lead to a more tenuous recovery than a one-time event. But many factors--including a person’s coping mechanisms prior to the event, their support system, and their ability to foresee a better future--influence how they survive.

We marvel at refugees coming here from the cruelest of circumstances who ultimately build happy lives. We look at the parents of children killed in school shootings and wonder how they can ever move on. The answer is that the pain never goes away, but resilient people find a way to come through to the other side.

It is helpful to make a distinction between stress and trauma. Stress is part of living. Normal workplace and family situations cause stress. Stress can be exacerbated by unusual situations, such as the rollercoaster of Covid. While many are still struggling, many others have figured out a way to live with it. Trauma, on the other hand, generally refers to life-threatening events or extreme loss. Resilience is necessary, but not everyone is born resilient.

Sometimes when asked, “How did you manage?” the answer may be, “I don’t know—I didn’t have a choice.” Or “I just did.” But that’s not telling the whole story. So it might be useful to break down what’s really going on.

Dr. Dennis Charney, dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai Hospital, had spent his career studying resiliency. Then, one morning in 2016, a doctor whom he had fired from the hospital shot him as he left a bagel shop. This caused serious and permanent injuries. Thus, he found himself experiencing first-hand the theories that he and a co-author, Yale Medical School doctor Steven Southwick, had been studying for years. As Dr. Charney recovered, his experience personally verified their earlier findings.

The ten traits (or “prescriptions”) that people use to find resiliency are identified by Charney and Southwick:

1. Have a Positive Attitude. They say that optimism is partly genetic, but it can also be learned.
2. Cognitive Flexibility Through Cognitive Reappraisal. Essentially this means accepting the emotional impact of the event, which can help lead to recovery.
3. Embracing a Moral Compass. For some this may mean faith or spiritual beliefs; for others it may mean devoting oneself to a cause.
4. Finding a Resilient Role Model. Finding someone who has triumphed over adversity, and modeling oneself after this person.
5. Face Your Fears. Fear is normal, and learning to acknowledge the fear will increase self-esteem.
6. Develop Active Coping Skills. This is done through actively creating positive statements about oneself and seeking the support of others.
7. Establish and Nurture a Supportive Social Network. Close relationships with people and organizations are a way to gain emotional strength. Isolation is the worst way to cope.
8. Attend to Physical Well-Being. Exercise, good eating habits, and alcohol regulation all contribute to physical well-being.
9. Train Regularly and Rigorously in Multiple Areas. This synthesizes some earlier traits. It means training oneself in emotional intelligence (empathy and perception), moral integrity, and physical endurance.
10. Recognize, Utilize, and Foster Signature Strengths. Learning to recognize one's own strengths will help to deal with stressful situations.

While some of these traits are inborn, they can all be learned. Therapy, support groups, talking to "people who have been there," and living in a loving community like Shelter Island can all help sufferers foster resiliency.

On January 28, 2022 (which is Holocaust Remembrance Day), the Shelter Island Library will devote its Friday Night Dialogues series to a group of Islanders who have suffered various traumas and have successfully recovered and subsequently thrived. These remarkable people live among us and are a source of inspiration. There is a separate Reporter article in this issue sharing the details of this program.

It's been a tough two years, and it isn't over yet. All of us hope to find the resiliency within, and help teach our children how to do so as well. Life has so many joys, but it certainly has its challenges. We need to confront them head-on.

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