



# BUILDING RESILIENCE: 5 WAYS TO A BETTER LIFE

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In case you hadn't noticed, life is difficult, complex and unpredictable. You can't change this. It's the nature of things. But you can prepare yourself for the next unwelcome surprise.

How? By building resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from life's inevitable disappointments, failures, and pains.

Let me use an analogy here.

If cars didn't have shock absorbers, every ride would be a miserable experience. The ride through life without shock absorbers – that is, resilience – would be the same. So, without building resilience – your own internal shock absorbers – it's not possible to lead a happy and productive life.

Resilience is the opposite of fragility. To be fragile means that just about everything upsets you. And if just about everything upsets you, you will spend a lot of time angry and hurt. And if you spend a lot of time angry and hurt, you will not be a happy person.

Here, I'm not focusing on severe illness, the death of a loved one or any crushing life-changing event. In such cases, people usually need help to recover. But for most of us, such situations are rare – while the slights and disappointments of ordinary life are not. And for those, we need resilience.

OK, then. How do you develop resilience? Here are some suggestions to get you started, drawn from my forty-plus years as a psychiatrist.

First, get some perspective. Step back and assess your situation with as much objectivity as you can. "How bad is this problem?" "Have I overstated it?"

Sometimes my patients think an unhappy occurrence is much more serious than it really is – usually because it's amplified by evoking a painful childhood issue. Often getting perspective is as simple as asking yourself this question: "What's the worst thing that can happen?" Usually you'll discover the worst thing isn't *that* bad – and isn't even likely to happen.

Second, compare the undeserved *bad* things that have happened to you with the unearned *good* things that have happened to you.

When I ask my patients to do this, they invariably conclude that the unearned good in their life far outweighs the undeserved bad. I'd say the ratio is at least 10 to 1. In my own case, I didn't

earn the incredibly good fortune of my grandparents moving to America, or that life-saving penicillin was available to me in my childhood when I was sick. I could go on and on. And so could you. In light of this, maybe things aren't so bad after all. In fact, they're probably pretty good.

Third, toughen up.

Life hits you from all directions – health, personal relationships, work challenges, family issues. To deal with them, you need to build up your mental toughness. The earlier in life one starts this process, the better.

That's why parents who coddle their children and protect them from every hurt and failure are not doing them any favors. Nor are colleges that provide students with so-called "safe spaces." To toughen up, you need to push yourself. How do you know what you're capable of if you don't do that?

I was a sickly child. I saw myself as physically fragile. But the grueling hours in medical school and treating patients with serious illnesses during my residency showed me I was much tougher than I had believed. You, too, probably have more strength than you realize. Find out. Finding that strength will give you resilience.

Fourth, be the architect of your own fate.

Although there are many times in life when we can't control circumstances, there are very few times when we can't control how we react to them.

The late Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer provides an inspiring example of this. Krauthammer became a quadriplegic in medical school following a freak diving accident. Rather than wallow in self-pity, Krauthammer resolved to finish his medical studies from his hospital bed. He did – and without missing a single semester!

Fifth, take an honest inventory of your life.

Make a real effort to discover how you have contributed to your own misery. In other words, how many of your life's speed bumps have you created? This will help you see that the ability to change your life lies as much within you as in external circumstances.

You can then avoid those behaviors that expose you to failure or difficulty. Focus on your power, not your helplessness. And the greatest power anyone has is the capacity to change.

You can certainly experience happy moments without resilience. But to lead a happy life, it's essential.

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