



Bouncing Back From Adversity

By Marnell Jameson

Before that fateful September 11 five years ago, Elizabeth Story-Maley's life was blissfully typical. The 35-year-old mother was teaching exercise classes at a local gym and keeping up the Manhattan apartment she shared with her husband and then 8-month-old twins. "We were just living our quiet ordinary lives," she recalls. "I had no idea what kind of person I would be in a crisis."

Then she learned.

When the bombing of the World Trade Towers put the welfare of her family at stake, Elizabeth found at her core a feisty resilience she didn't know she had. Today, she says, she's a better person because of it.

"Elizabeth is one of those special people who, when they get hit by crisis, turn their misfortune into something positive," says Dr. Al Siebert, director of the Resiliency Center, in Portland, Ore.

Elizabeth lived just six blocks from Ground Zero. For days and weeks after the towers collapsed, the air was so thick with dust that Elizabeth and her son, Jake, couldn't get their breath. When she found they both had developed asthma, her fear turned to fury. "No one in our family had ever had a respiratory problems, and suddenly our days were a blitz of doctors appointments, inhalers and nebulizer treatments," she says.

Once she stabilized her family's health, she launched a new plan of action. "After the terrorist attacks, I saw a lot of people being emotional, and I thought, 'That's not going to fix anything,'" says Elizabeth, who instead read up on asthma and air quality. "I decided I needed to do something positive so when I looked back on these awful events, I could find the good in them."

That was the beginning of Breath of Angels, a nonprofit foundation she started in conjunction with the American Lung Association to help rescue workers and residents who suffered respiratory problems after the 9/11 attacks. "For me, it's brought into focus the choice we all have, to live life on the periphery or take an active role."

"It's also a case-study in resiliency," says Dr. Siebert.

Why do some people bounce back from life's setbacks stronger than before, while others never recover? Researchers who have studied resiliency now have some answers. "In life, we may not be able to control what happens, but we can control our response," says Dr.

Andrew Shatte, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and co-author of "The Resilience Factor" (Random House/Broadway Division, October 2002).

He and other researchers have isolated the traits that many resilient people share. While you don't need to have all of them to triumph over tragedy, having -- or cultivating -- a few could serve you well.

Rein in Emotions

Most of us react emotionally to a major crisis, or even a minor setback. Feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety or fear are appropriate and normal. However, people who recover from misfortune best don't wallow in the emotion.

"In the face of conflict or crisis," says Dr. Shatte, "resilient people exercise self-control. They don't ride out feelings of intense anger and anxiety. They also don't lash out and burn bridges." Putting emotions aside lets you think more clearly, so you get a more accurate understanding of the situation.

"People who focus on their feelings too much do not cope well with life's challenges," says Dr. Siebert, also the author of "The Survivor Personality" (Penguin Putnam, 1996). "Give yourself a set amount of time to feel sorry for yourself or grieve a loss, then move on."

Non-resilient people also get caught in the rut of recycling old emotions, which turns into one long excuse for why they're having problems years later. By contrast, those who look to learn something from their situation, cope better. "Resilient people go into a mode of rapid 'reality read' and quickly adapt," says Dr. Siebert.

Make the Best of the Worst

People who bounce back from setbacks and move forward seem to share a philosophy: "Whatever the problem," they say, "I'll make something good come of it."

When Cynthia Dailey-Hewkin, now 61, learned in 1992 that the Trojan Nuclear Plant in Ranier, Ore., where she worked as a secretary, was going to close, and that she and 1,500 other employees were going to lose their jobs, her first thought was "What am I going to do?" But fairly quickly, her question changed to: "What can I do?" Then to an even more powerful question: "What can I do to help?"

At the time, she had other problems as well: Her mother was dying of a brain tumor, and her marriage of 28 years was ending in divorce. But Cynthia stayed focused on action, not self-pity. "I never felt like a victim and never blamed anyone. 'This is just life,' I told myself." As the layoffs began, she noticed how worried her fellow workers were becoming about money. So she began writing a column for the employee newsletter on ways to save. Her column, "Saving with Cynthia," which covered everything from getting cheap insurance to making pantyhose last longer, was a hit.

She also noticed many of her co-workers were too distressed to look for work. Cynthia found herself in the informal role of counselor. "I discovered I had an interest and a knack for helping people identify their skills and find new jobs."

Her column and can-do spirit made an impression on the people working at Trojan's parent company, Portland General Electric, who hired her in a new position at a higher salary the day her layoff took effect. Today, she has parlayed that experience into a "dream job," working as an employment specialist for a career center in Beaverton, Ore., helping people through the job-finding process. "If it weren't for the layoff at Trojan, none of this would have happened. It opened up a whole new world for me."

"Resilient people like Cynthia believe they can take control of their world and be masters of their destiny," says Dr. Shatte. "While they may rely on faith, they don't rely on fate, or wait for help to fall into their lap. They make something positive happen."

Try a New Point of View

Being able to recognize the opportunities within a setback takes a special kind of open-mindedness. All of us have a thinking style that we've developed over the years. Our unique way of processing information is what shapes our perceptions. The problem is, says Dr. Shatte, our perceptions, especially in the midst of adversity, are often not accurate. Yet those perceptions, whether true or false, drive our feelings and actions.

People who bounce back best, have a flexible thinking style, says Dr. Shatte. "They are especially good at getting out of their habitual way of thinking and looking at problems in a new way. As a result they perceive the world more accurately."

Think Positive

"Somehow, some way we're going to deal with this." If resilient people had a chorus, that would be it, says Dr. Siebert. "Survivor types just believe things will work out, and that optimistic self-confidence goes a long way toward making their belief come true."

Dr. Dina Carbonell, a research associate at Simmons College in Boston, has been part of a long-term study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health that has tracked 400 people for 25 years, from age 5 to 30, to study the factors that affect mental health.

She and her colleagues have found that one of the over-riding characteristics among people who consistently make the best out of difficult circumstances is optimism. "No matter how bad things get, they inevitably say, 'Bad things aren't going to last forever.'" Less resilient people tend to believe that things will never change. Survivors can also imagine possibilities that aren't there right now. For example, they can see their way out of an abusive relationship or a dead-end job.

Inger Jessen, of Huntington Beach, Calif., was 39 years old when she was diagnosed with an inherited heart defect that killed her father and, later, her son. Five heart surgeries bought her time but didn't cure her body's tendency to produce excessive plaque in her

arteries. In 1994, her doctors said her only chance to live was a heart transplant. By the time a heart became available three years later, she could barely walk across the room.

But once her new heart was in place, Inger, then age 55, became the comeback kid. Five days after surgery, she walked around the block. Three months later, she was hiking the Rockies in Colorado. She also took up water aerobics at the local YMCA. During one of those classes, she heard about the 1999 World Transplant Olympic Games coming up in Budapest, Hungary, where people with organ transplants from all over the world compete in sporting events.

"I knew I had to compete," she recalls, "not just for myself, but for the 19-year-old-boy who died in an accident and made my new life possible." She started training with a swim instructor and swam hard every day. Everyone but Inger was surprised when she took home the gold medal in the 50-meter breaststroke. The next year she won the Gold in the U.S. Transplant Olympic Games, and a silver in the 2001 World Transplant Olympic Games in Japan. "It never occurred to me that I couldn't do it."

Though she suffered a small stroke a year ago, making her unable to compete in the U.S. Games in 2002, she has her sights set on the next games. Now, she says, people who once doubted her are the first ones to say: "If anyone can do it, you can."

Reach Out

Though it seems contradictory, resilient people are often both strongly self-sufficient and don't hesitate to reach out for help. In the Simmons study, Dr. Carbonell found that "resilient people identify those who are available, trustworthy and helpful. Then they go to the light."

Sometimes the light, as in Karen Haag's case, is a support group. After being diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999, Karen, 41, who is head women's basketball coach for the College of Saint Rose, in Albany, N.Y., got involved with a cancer support group within a few weeks. They coached her through all her surgical, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. That was as important to her mental recovery as her treatments were to her physical recovery.

In the group, Karen met two women she now considers among her best friends. When the three women heard about weekend retreat for cancer patients, where they would be pampered and could talk about their experiences, they signed right up.

"The weekend was a wonderful, powerful, inspirational experience," recalls Karen. "We thought every cancer patient should be able to go." The only problem was the camp was 160 miles from where they lived. So they put their time and talents together to create a similar weekend retreat closer to home.

In September 2001, using grant money from the northeast Pennsylvania affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and the pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb, they opened Camp Bravehearts, a retreat for cancer survivors in the

Scranton Wilkes-Barre area of Pennsylvania. Forty-three women came to the first weekend retreat.

As Karen discovered, reaching out for support is great, but reaching out to give back is even greater. "Resilient people seem to intuitively know that reaching out and attaching to something bigger than yourself creates more meaning in your life," says Dr. Shatte.

"Without a doubt," agrees Karen, "starting this camp is the best thing any of us has ever done."

Find the Humor

Nothing pulls you out of the depths of despair quite like a well-placed joke. Humor is a wonderful coping device, and a technique resilient people use often and with ease.

"I'm always encouraged when I see someone in a crisis make a joke," says Dr. Siebert. "Seeing things from a different perspective, especially a funny one, shows you can take some emotional distance and see the situation from another point of view."

Karen admits the humor she shares with her cancer friends can be a little black. One Halloween, she remembers her friend went to see her oncologist for a checkup after a surgery to reconstruct her breast. When the doctor went to examine her, he found she'd painted her new breast like a jack-o'-lantern. "She had the office laughing for a week," says Karen.

Get a Bonus

Although the benefits of increasing your resiliency may seem obvious -- you recover more quickly, become better for the setback and make the world around you better -- there's one more not so obvious payoff to beefing up your resiliency quotient: Life gets better with age.

"Less resilient people become more irritable and negative over time, while resilient folks become more competent at life, spend less time surviving and simply enjoy life more," says Dr. Siebert. They realize, it's not the crisis, but what you make of it that counts.

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