

At the Heart of Recovery, Personal Resilience

In the wake of September's terrorist attacks, Americans have been urged to resume our daily routines and normal lives. For many, especially those who have lost family and friends, recovery may seem overwhelming. Yet we've all witnessed women and men who, despite their losses, rise to this challenge and carry on. Across gender, ethnicity, education, and economic status, one quality these people share is *resilience*—the ability to bounce back from hardship.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Psychologists have learned much about resilience from studies of concentration-camp survivors, people with severe handicaps, and children from broken or impoverished homes. Experts conclude that such individuals share many of the following characteristics.

- *Authenticity*, or a sense of self. A woman who is content within herself doesn't need to maintain a facade, nor does her identity depend on externals such as money or position. Thus, she's less likely to be devastated by losing these things.

- *Authorship*. Resilient people don't see themselves as passive victims, even in circumstances beyond their control, such as a serious illness or disaster. Instead, they respond actively. Tapping into their own strengths and taking positive action helps them come to "own" such experiences. It also helps them avoid resenting others or assigning blame.

- *Flexibility*. Although change is intrinsic to life, changes wrought by loss are the hardest to accept. In general, the resilient perceive change as a challenge—even an opportunity. Thus, they are less vulnerable to the fear and anxiety that accompany uncertainty and chaos. An important aspect of flexibility is *responsiveness*. Resilient people are engaged in the world around them and aware of new ideas. This helps them adapt.

- *Belief in the transcendent*. A sense of purpose beyond oneself—whether it comes from religious faith or a love of nature, art, music, or humanity—can

produce an unflagging conviction that life is worth living.

BECOMING MORE RESILIENT

To a degree, resilience is inborn—resilient adults were often resilient in childhood. But it's still possible to strengthen this trait.

If you feel you aren't recovering from a setback as rapidly as you'd like, consider seeing a mental health professional for evaluation. Impaired resilience is one sign of depression, a condition that robs us of self-esteem, energy to meet challenges, and faith in life. Depression, which affects about 25% of women at some time in their lives, can be successfully treated in 80%–90% of cases.

If you're not depressed and want to be more resilient, consider the following:

- *Let your true self shine through*. Authenticity is central to resilience. If you've spent a lifetime cultivating a "face to the world"—perhaps to accommodate others or mesh with societal ideals—showing your true feelings may not be easy. Friends, support groups, or professional counseling can help.

- *Accept responsibility for your life*. Make decisions that affirm your values and standards. Recognize that while some things are beyond your control, you can still influence most situations. This helps counter resentment, fear, and the inability to forgive.

- *Stay connected*. Renew your interest in life and those around you. Keep abreast of political, cultural, economic, and technological developments so you understand and can adapt to the world we live in.

- *Accept change*. It's a given. The variable lies in our response.

- *Practice your beliefs*. If your strength springs from religion, try deepening your involvement in your faith community. Or spend more time in prayer or meditation. Take part in pursuits that uplift your spirit, whether that's the arts, outdoor activities, or something else. Explore opportunities to volunteer—helping others may be the best way of healing ourselves. ❖

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