

# RISING ABOVE ADVERSITY

## How to Strengthen Your Resilience Muscle

by April Thompson

At one time or another, an estimated 70 percent of people experience a life-altering traumatic event, and most grow stronger from surviving it, according to decades of research by leading institutions like Harvard and Yale universities and the University of Pennsylvania. We can prepare now for life's inevitable hurdles and setbacks by developing the skills and tools of resilience.

“It’s an incredibly hopeful message: We can go through the most terrible things imaginable and still get through to a better place,” says David B. Feldman, associate professor of counseling psychology at California’s Santa Clara University and co-author with Lee Daniel Kravetz of *Supersurvivors: The Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success*.

Such researchers have found that, like elastic stretched beyond its normal limits, people often don’t just bounce back to their old form, but stretch and expand in new ways. The pair conducted in-depth case studies of survivors of extreme traumatic experiences that went on to do bold things. Just one case in point: After losing a leg in a car accident, college basketball player Casey Pieretti reinvented himself as a successful Hollywood stuntman.

According to many studies, 60 to 80 percent of people grow in some way from personal trauma, known as “post-traumatic growth,” according to Feldman. “It can be as simple as appreciating each day more. It can mean deepening relationships. It may result in a renewed sense of spirituality. Or, it might take one’s life in a dramatically different direction,” he says.

Ila Eckhoff, a financial executive in New York City, has experienced more than her share of challenges: developing cerebral palsy as a toddler, enduring 12 childhood surgeries, losing her mother at age 11 and four years ago, her husband. “All of the struggles and losses brought me here, now,” says Eckhoff. “Nobody ever said life was easy. We have greater appreciation for the things that we had to struggle to achieve.”

Choosing self-directedness instead of self-pity in the face of challenges differentiates those that thrive from those that merely survive, observes Catherine Morisset, a life coach from Ottawa, Canada, who specializes in resilience. “It’s taking responsibility for life and managing



the way you want to live it. We all have choices, even in the face of difficulty,” she says.

### Mastering an Optimal Outlook

“Challenges don’t define you. How you respond does,” remarks Doug Hensch, an executive coach and author of *Positively Resilient: 5½ Secrets to Beat Stress, Overcome Obstacles, and Defeat Anxiety*. He attests that having a growth mindset is vital, focusing on strengths without disregarding areas needing improvement.

Maintaining a balanced outlook that’s realistic, yet positive, enables individuals to move on from trauma. For supersurvivors, being pragmatic serves them far better than a false sense of optimism about bad situations, Feldman found, saying, “They grieved losses, but thought realistically about what to do next.”

“Optimism in the best sense is focusing on the positive without denying the negative, while focusing on what’s in your



control,” notes Hensch.

Martin Seligman, known as the “father of positive psychology”, found that when people take setbacks personally, viewing them as permanent, pervasive and personal, they develop a sense of learned helplessness that inhibits growth and happiness. “It’s important not to ‘catastrophize’ or generalize a failure and extend it to other areas of life,” says Dr. Steven M. Southwick, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine who focuses on post-traumatic stress disorder and resilience.

## Make Caring Connections

Social networks are critical in the face of challenges, resilience experts agree. “When we are wronged or feel unsafe, it’s natural to withdraw when we should do the opposite,” says Feldman. “It’s also not the number of friends you have, or even how much time you spend with them, that matters. All you need is at least one person you can count on.”

“We are built to be connected with others. It has a significant impact in regulating stress,” says Southwick, a co-author of *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges*, from West Haven, Connecticut. Over the past two decades, Southwick and his colleagues have studied three groups that have come through harrowing events: being Vietnam War prisoners, Special Forces instructors and civilians. They found people that rebounded strongly often shared common attributes, including embracing a spiritual outlook and social network.

In 2013, Damon Redd, of Boulder, Colorado, awoke to a severe flooding event, with his home and business buried under five feet of mud and water that nearly wiped out his clothing business, Kind Design, overnight. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through, to lose everything I had built. It also gave me a new perspective on what’s important. It made me aware that you can replace physical things, but you can’t replace memories. My mind was blown away by the support I received.”

Redd ended up paying forward the kindness. “We cleaned and repaired 1,500 pairs of gloves in our inventory that were damaged that day, and are donating them to search-and-rescue teams and ski patrols. The more good you do, the more good

other people will do,” Redd professes.

Altruism and owning a moral code is another common characteristic of resilient individuals, according to Southwick. Having a purpose is a huge indicator of whether a person will rise to the occasion. “You can endure almost anything if you have a mission, or believe what you are doing has meaning. It gives you great strength,” he says.

In 2016, Bobbi Huffman lost her high school sweetheart and husband to suicide a few days before Valentine’s Day. As she began to process the tragedy, she saw two choices ahead: “Drop into a deep depression and give up or focus on our deep love for one another, get into therapy, and make a difference by inspiring, encouraging and helping others,” says Huffman.

She chose the latter, asking for professional help and signing up for the 16-mile Overnight Walk for Suicide Prevention, in New York City. “Getting into the best shape of my life at age 50 became my passion. As I walked through the night, I reflected on our beautiful memories as a couple. It was an amazing, healing experience,” reflects Huffman.

Forgiveness—whether for others or ourselves—is another key to help us move forward, reports Feldman. “Often, people can get stuck in blame, but resentment keeps people shackled to the past. If and when a person is ready to forgive, widespread research indicates that it can lead to better health outcomes.”

## Strengthening Our Resilience Muscle

Experts point out that there isn’t any one perfect formula or single must-have trait for building resilience, and none we can’t develop. Learning a skill like mindfulness is an easy place to start.

“Resilient people don’t try to avoid stress, but learn how to manage and master it,” says Southwick. “Mindfulness meditation requires practice, but through it, you can learn to regulate emotions and relax the nervous system.”

Eckhoff practices mindfulness several times a day with a one-minute gratitude meditation. “I have five things I am most grateful for. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and say them. It brings me focus,

reduces stress and reminds me of how lucky I am,” she says.

Morisset suggests making incremental changes to strengthen our resilience muscles. “Success builds success and failure builds failure, so do something you know you can accomplish and build on that,” she counsels.

Writing can also be a good coping tool, according to Hensch. “Just write about your emotions. It’s amazing how much you can learn about yourself and how calming it can be.”

Good times are the best times to begin “resilience training” notes Hensch. “I sought out a therapist once I had turned the corner after my divorce and was dating someone and my business was taking off. It was precisely because I knew something else would likely happen, and I wanted to be better prepared for it,” he recalls.

Applying positive self-talk when something blindsides us helps, as does not expecting to handle things perfectly. “There’s nothing wrong with just staying afloat when you’re in the middle of trauma or adversity. One key to happiness in life is just managing expectations. It’s okay to be anxious, sad and worried at times—in fact, it’s healthy,” says Hensch.

Hardships are just that: hard. However, with time and experience, resilient individuals come to trust their ability to get through them, large and small. “Resiliency is not about how you bounce back from a single traumatic event; it’s how you respond every day to the challenges that life presents,” Eckhoff has learned. “Repetitive use of this ‘muscle’ builds strength and enables you to do more and sometimes, the impossible.”

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