

Develop Resilience to Recover From Setbacks

“Hope springs eternal,” proclaims the poet, but what happens to those who have lost hope? Death, illness, loss—all can throw us into despair and depression. Yet loss and suffering are an inevitable part of life.

Why do some bounce back from major and minor losses and others never recover? More importantly, how can we build our resilience so that we can recover from life’s blows and forge ahead?

Have a purpose and mission in life

The most important factor in building resilience is to connect with a purpose in life larger than yourself or any one event. Some people define their purpose spiritually; they see themselves as part of a divine plan. Others look outward and ask: How can I make my life, my experiences have a positive impact in the community? Still others have personal goals that steel them through setbacks: They forge ahead because they need to provide for their family, or they want to serve a cause or express themselves through art or action. Whatever the purpose or mission, resilient people develop goals and plans that focus beyond the present crisis.

Perhaps the most famous example of resiliency is Victor Frankl, the much-lauded writer, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor who found the will to live in the midst of horror by pledging himself to future goals. Throughout his ordeal in the concentration camps, he asked himself why some prisoners survived—given the chance to survive—and others did not. He determined that the survivors had developed reasons to live that helped them retain hope for the future.

Finding a purpose in life can help people survive traumatic loss. Candy Lightner, for example, founded Mother’s Against Drunk Driving after her 13-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a drunk driver. This mission not only gave her the will to go on but also helped her create something positive out of a senseless tragedy.

Of course, you don’t need to survive a Holocaust or the death of a loved one to experience loss. Anyone can be thrown for a loop by the loss of a job, a breakup, defeats in sports or work, rejections of art or friendship, or any of the disappointments, big and small, that beset us throughout life.

Having a goal or mission beyond the present crisis will help you recover. The goal can be as complex as starting a foundation or as simple as taking care of a pet. The idea is that you have something that gets you out of bed every morning and back into life.

View mistakes and failures positively

Resilient people know that failures and mistakes are not dead-ends. They’re an inevitable part of life. Expect them and accept them as learning experiences. Most successful entrepreneurs, for example, fail many times before they finally find a business that works. They’re resilient because they don’t let failures and mistakes stop them—they use them as learning experiences the same way a scientist uses trial and error as part of the discovery process.

Studies show that people who suffer repeated setbacks grow in resiliency. Why? Because they’ve learned that life goes on despite difficulties. When new problems arrive—as they always will—these people have the experience and perspective needed to bounce back. They’ve truly learned that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Examine your values

Another way to gain perspective and become more resilient is to ask yourself what your values are and why you do what you do? For example, say the family breadwinner loses her high-paying job. She can get through this crisis by identifying her greater goals and values. She may discover that it’s more

important to her to be a good parent or a good friend. If so, the loss of the fancy job has not affected that—in fact, she may now have more time to fulfill those goals.

The loss of a job may also be an opportunity to redefine what you need and want out of life. Do you really need X amount of dollars, or can you live on less? A setback may be an opportunity to change directions in your career or personal life. Resilient people know how to look for the proverbial silver lining.

Build your resiliency muscles

In our fast-paced world of changing technology, lay-offs and job jumping, people need to prepare for setbacks, transitions and bumps in the road. Here are some ideas for flexing your resiliency muscles:

- Learn to like change.
- Take care of yourself physically and emotionally.
- Build your self-esteem.
- Create a network of friends, peers and business associates.
- Develop problem-solving skills.
- Have a sense of humor.

Sources: *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor E. Frankl. Beacon Press, 1959; International Network on Personal Meaning, www.meaning.ca/index.html; *Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes Into Stepping Stones for Success* by John C. Maxwell; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000; The Resiliency Center, www.resiliencycenter.com; Victor Frankl Institute, <http://logotherapy.univie.ac.at/>

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