





1 You Were Born Resilient

People typically react with surprise and a certain amount of disbelief when I tell them, “It is more likely for someone who experiences great adversity to bounce back from it with a resilient outcome than not.” I share this in the **resiliency** seminars that I have given to hundreds of audiences across the U.S. and in other countries over the past 20 years. I tell my audiences that in fact, resiliency, defined as the capacity to spring back, rebound, and overcome adversity, is “hard-wired” into the human makeup.

There is still a prevalent belief if someone is abused, traumatized, or stressed by severe crises, that person may not make it through this adversity, that he or she will be completely and permanently derailed by the experience. In reality, most people not only “make it through” but they go on to mine the life lessons of the difficulty. They bounce back smarter, stronger, and with the self-esteem of having accessed a core of overcoming they didn’t know they had within them. The growing body of research from psychology, sociology, psychiatry, and social work that focuses on what happens to people over time that experience great adversity has yielded this knowledge. The outcome of this research has in fact coined a new concept: positive development from adversity.

So, why does the myth prevail that disaster leads to a destroyed life? Perhaps it is because our survival instincts, also hardwired into the human species, cause us to pay much more attention to the potential for life destruction than to the potential for overcoming, rebuilding, and transcending the negative. This is acutely obvious surveying the nightly news, or reading news reports online or in publications. The emphasis is on the negative, and the subtext is one of horrific, non-ending stress and floundering. Yet the thousands of stories in which people have done well in the face of awful life circumstances and experiences go unreported and unnoticed.

Resilient Every Day

In reality, all of us are resilient every day. Psychologists studying human reactions in the face of awful adversity (such as war, abuse, poverty, illness, and similar adversity) have concluded that we all have an innate, self-righting, and transcending ability. (Some of the research of these psychologists will be highlighted throughout this book.) Though we don’t usually realize it, we access this resilient core daily in ways great and small such as when we lose our car keys or cell phone, or when the alarm doesn’t go off, or when the washing machine breaks down, or we get lost driving to a new destination. Each day is filled with these types of incidents and each day is filled with our resiliency. Yet, it is something that we usually don’t give a second thought to...we just cope.

You have probably picked up this book because you are going through something really difficult, not just the loss of keys or a cell phone. Someone very close to you may have died. You may be suffering terrible anguish because of a tragedy you have gone through. You may be trying to go back to school after years away or retraining for a new

job because you are now unemployed. Or maybe you are still looking for work after years of trying. Perhaps you have been severely injured, emotionally and/or physically. Or, perhaps your adversity is a chronic challenge like Janine who has struggled throughout her life with depression, despite trying many medications. In addition, she has a stressful job in which she is undervalued and underpaid, is a single mom of two teens, and her ex-husband has never stepped up to support his children.

Or you may relate to Daren, who was devastated when after only a few weeks of marriage, he began having significant problems with his new wife, Kayla. They had dated a year and a half before the wedding and were doing fine, so he thought. But after he moved into her small duplex, two bedrooms and one bath for the couple and Kayla's teen-aged son, conflict developed. But Daren didn't really know what the problems were and Kayla wouldn't, or couldn't, tell him. He suggested counseling and she refused to go. A year later, Daren was divorced, depressed about it all, and still mystified. He determined, however, to learn from the painful experience. He went to counseling by himself, and read all he could about mid-life marriages, and what makes them work or falter. Years later, he still didn't understand Kayla, but he had become more aware of himself and the "red flags" he missed before the wedding. Death, divorce, disaster, destruction, on-going stress and challenges are a part of the life journey of being human, but so is the overcoming of them.

Strategies from Social Science Research

My guess is that you typically focus on the difficulty and pain of your problems, which is understandable. This book will encourage you to focus, in addition, on the ways you have and are—like Daren—maneuvering through, climbing over, outwitting, and accessing an innate core of yourself, your resiliency. And it offers strategies from the social science research that has looked at how people are able to bounce back from and transcend their difficulties.

You may also find in these pages a connection between this science and your unique philosophical or spiritual perspective. A group of Air Force chaplains who recently went through my resiliency training of trainers reminded me that a core Christian message is "The Kingdom of God is within." A Hindu man once handed me a note after a presentation with this quotation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the holy book of that religion: "Whatever is real, always was and cannot be destroyed." The Dalai Lama has said, "With realization of one's own potential and self-confidence in one's ability, one can build a better world." Resiliency researcher and professor Glenn Richardson has come to believe that the innate force that drives a person to a healthier, more self-actualized life can be called chi, spirit, God, or resilience.

One of my favorite inspirational authors, Wayne Muller, describes the universality of this "something" that is deep, wise, sustaining, and unblemishable in his book *How, Then, Shall We Live?* Noting that he is inspired by the scripture and sacred writings of "Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Sufism, Native American traditions, and others," he writes:

For thousands of years humankind has suffered famine, war, plague, hunger, and countless injustices; it has experienced numberless births and deaths. Each community of people has had to find some way to speak about [what] sustained them or brought them grace—even in the midst of terrible sorrow. We all struggle to name what cannot be named: the universal force that makes the grass improbably push its way through concrete, the force that turns the earth, the energy that blesses all life, the essential presence in our deepest nature that can never be spoken of with perfect accuracy.

Spirituality and Resiliency

Though the primary focus of this book is ways we are and can be more resilient, as shown by the social science research, it is interesting to contemplate the alignment between the core belief in almost every spiritual tradition that there is something strong, wise, sustaining, and profound in each person and the research findings on resiliency. In this book:

- You will find ways you have already been resilient that you've never thought about before. And you will learn how to apply your resiliency in the past to current challenges.
- You will also learn how to take the findings of the growing body of research on resiliency, which has focused on how people overcome the most difficult life challenges, and apply these findings to your life and your problems right now.
- You will identify how to come out the other side of the difficulties of life stronger and wiser, i.e., your positive development from this adversity. And you will understand how this and other resiliency-connected strategies lead to **“authentic” self-esteem** vs. other less effective methods of self-esteem building.
- You will learn how your inner self is speaking to you and how to tune in to this voice of “inner guidance.”
- You will also learn how to apply your research-based resiliency plan to whatever challenge you are facing now or may face in the future.
- You will take “The Resiliency Quiz” and be able to use it as a tool to measure your growing resiliency. And you will be introduced to other resiliency-building books, articles, and resources that I have found especially beneficial.

In this book, I am sharing with you all I have learned over the past 20 years about how to bounce back from life's adversity—no matter how painful—and to find the gifts of that adversity. I have divided each chapter into two parts: The first part provides information that I think is most useful and the second part—even more important to developing your resiliency—provides questions and activities so you can make the information *real for you*. In the back of the book you will also find a glossary of resiliency-connected terms that are typed in bold throughout the book.

Bouncing Back...Transformed

As you start this process, I want to emphasize that if you are so overwhelmed or distraught it seems impossible to understand or apply this information to your life, the most resiliency-building action you can take is to get some professional help. Counseling and therapy, especially by professionals who work from a resiliency/strengths-based perspective, will build your resiliency and help you to implement the strategies in this workbook. This workbook is not a substitute for needed treatment, and many resilient survivors of trauma note that counseling was the lifeline they needed in their darkest moments.

I spend time in my resiliency seminars convincing people that we are all “hard-wired to bounce back.” I call attention not only to the growing body of research, but also to the many personal examples that all of us have seen in ourselves and in those around us. The whole of history in fact is one big drama of human overcoming; this is also the theme of great literature, cinema, and other storytelling throughout the ages. It’s all about bouncing back, having been wounded, shifted, remolded, and transformed in the process. It’s what we are born to do.

Making it Real for You

- 1. Naming your resiliency in recent adversity.** Think of some small adversity you went through in the past day or two. Now identify, what helped you successfully manage and overcome that adversity? Think of both characteristics within yourself and anything or anyone outside yourself that helped.

- 2. Understanding the resiliency of someone you know.** Identify someone you know personally who has gone through and is “on the other side of” a very difficult life challenge. Write this person’s name and his or her adversity [such as a experiencing a difficult divorce, dropping out and returning to school, losing a child or another close loved one, facing a severe illness, having a parent or spouse deployed in war, etc.]:

* How did this person “get through” this adversity?

What *qualities* within this person helped him or her?

What *beliefs* held by this person helped him or her?

Who helped them?

How did they help?

What else helped?

