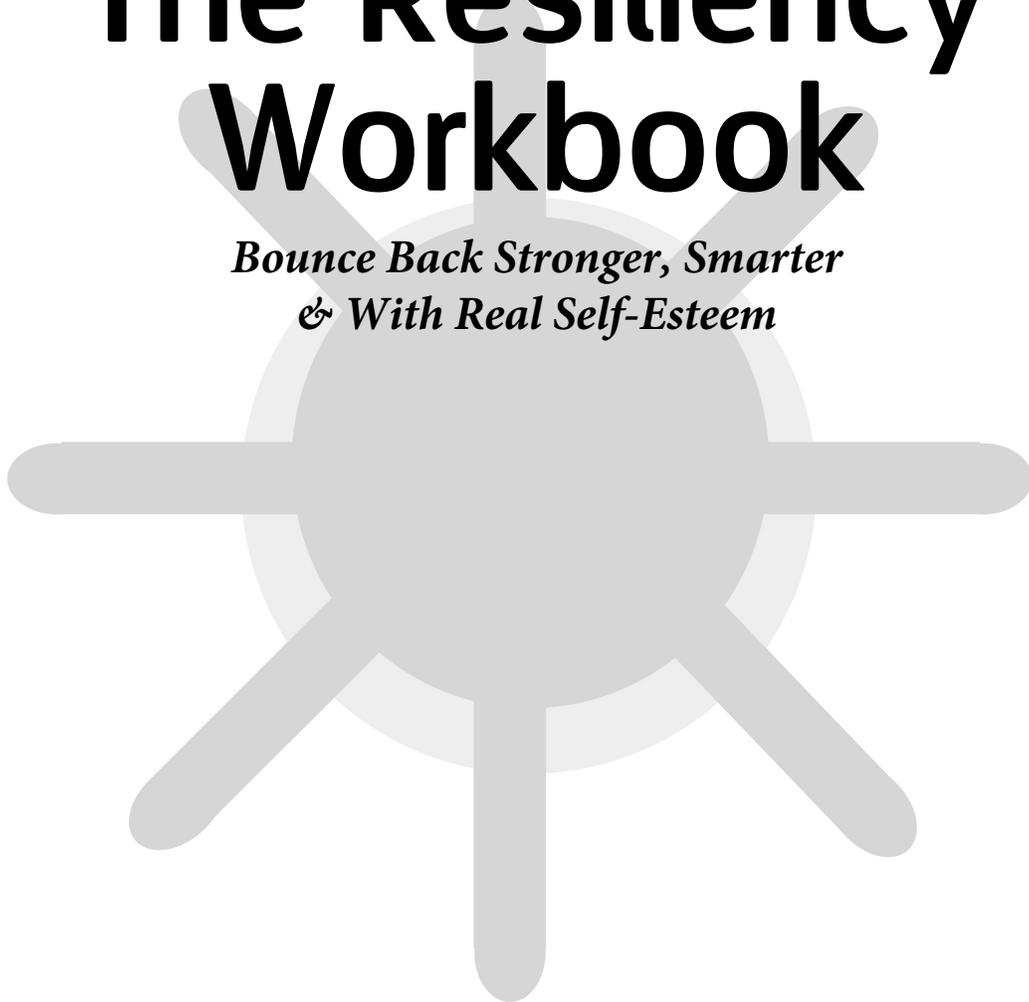


The Resiliency Workbook

*Bounce Back Stronger, Smarter
& With Real Self-Esteem*



Nan Henderson, M.S.W.

Resiliency In Action, Inc.
Solvang, CA

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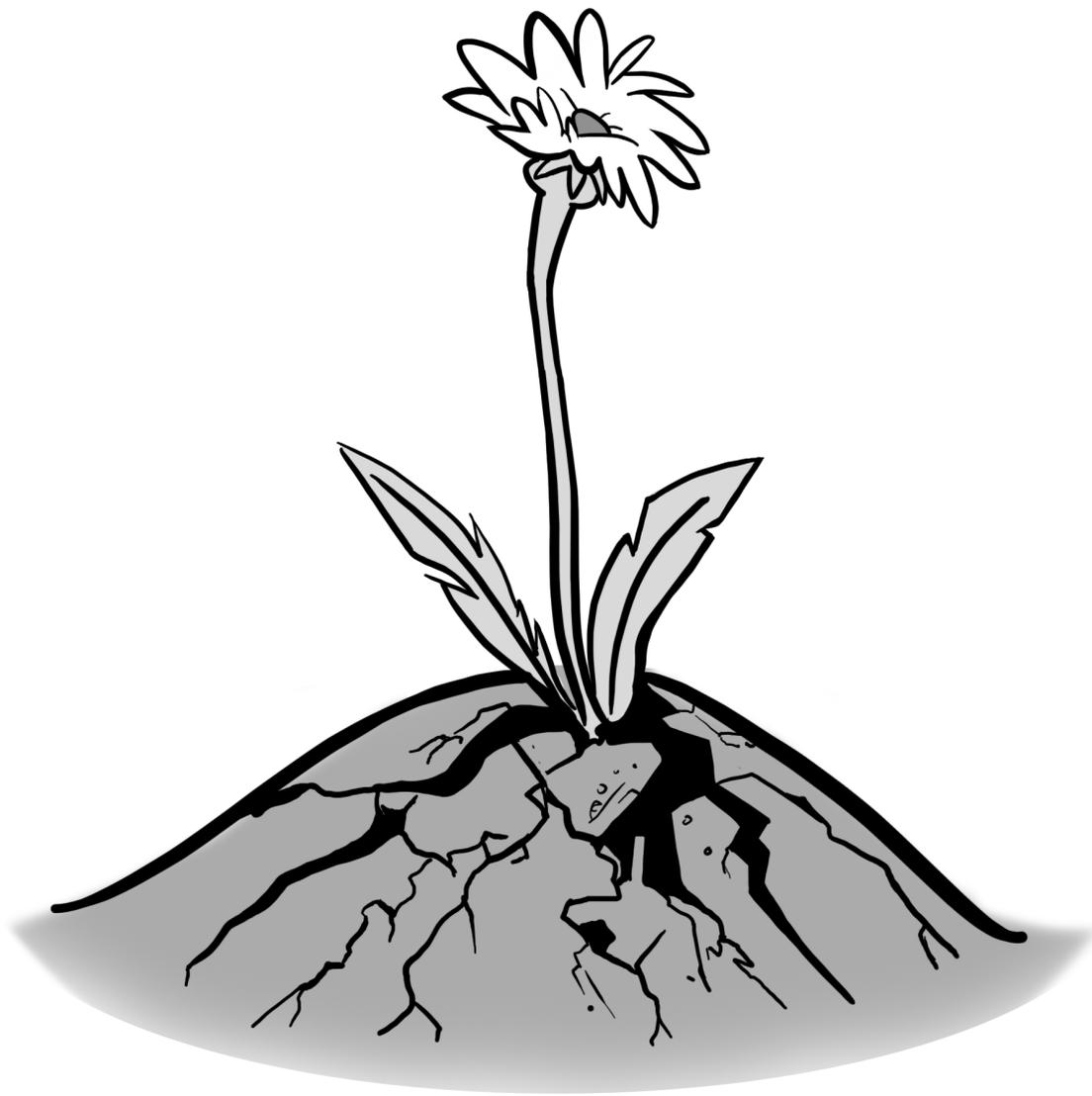
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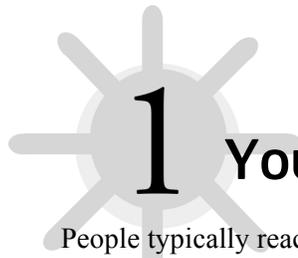
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1 You Were Born Resilient

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?

- * How have you observed this person using these same things in dealing with other problems?

- * What else do you think would have helped him or her?

- * What advice would you give anyone else facing this same type of adversity?

- * What strength or life lessons has this person developed or learned from the process of encountering and going through this adversity?

3. Connecting resiliency and your life philosophy.

- * Do you have a life philosophy or spiritual belief that connects to results of psychological research on resiliency that show there is an “innate, self-righting, and transcending ability” within us all?

- * If so, what is it and how does it connect?

- * What is your reaction to the alignment of social science research on human resiliency and a common message in most spiritual traditions about a powerful, transcendent core of our being?





2 A Research-Based Plan for Overcoming Life's Challenges

The concept of human resiliency began trickling into academic research journals in the 1980s. Prior to that time, the primary emphasis of both research and practice in the mental health professions was on psychological damage. Psychology and psychiatry, still relatively new fields of social science, focused almost exclusively on human problems and dysfunction rather than how people bounce back from them. The idea that children who experience great trauma would suffer life-long problems was strongly emphasized until a pioneering group of researchers began documenting human resiliency in the face of such suffering, and positive growth from such adversity. However, only in the past decade has the idea of “fostering resiliency” fully entered into the mental health professions, as well as education, community development, business, and the U.S. military.

Enlarging the Picture

Stephen and Sybil Wolin, a psychiatrist and a psychologist, describe several limitations of the traditional “damage” focus of psychology and psychiatry in their groundbreaking book *The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity* (published in 1993). They note that after being steeped in the “language of disease...and mastering an alphabet soup of symptoms and syndromes” mental health professionals “find illness and maladjustment” wherever they go. They add that the growing body of resiliency research points to the fact “we need to hear less about...susceptibility to harm and more about our ability to rebound from adversity when it comes our way.” This of course does not mean that illness and maladjustment do not exist. But it does mean that the picture needs to be enlarged to include the enormous power of the human spirit to rebound.

As a newly trained clinical social worker working in a mental health agency in the late 1980s, I too focused entirely on stress, risk, and pathology. That was what I was trained to see and that was all I saw. I hadn't yet encountered the concept of resiliency or strengths in the face of adversity. Yet I observed that this exclusive focus on problems did not provide the empowerment and hope that is usually needed for someone to bounce back from the problems that brought people into our agency. I kept asking myself, “what is wrong with this picture?” as client after client left my intake assessments looking more discouraged than when he or she walked in. Intuitively, I was already sensing the limitations of the “damage only” approach and I was seeking another greater, and more effective-for-change, perspective. Fortunately, in 1990, I found research being reported in academic journals that talked about people being “far more than their problems” and evidence that all of us have “an innate, self-righting, and transcending ability.”

A quick perusal of the past few years of resiliency research reports shows that the focus of this research has expanded from its early emphasis on the resiliency of children

who experience great adversity to family resiliency, community resiliency, resiliency in all types of illness, resiliency and disabilities, resiliency and refugees, resiliency in every type of ethnic group, resiliency in incarcerated prisoners, resiliency in business, and resiliency in all aspects of military service, including war.

The Truth about Resiliency

An important outcome of the growing body of resiliency research is that it has identified the difference between those who experience great adversity and do integrate it, grow from it, and move on vs. those who are pulled down and derailed by it.

Resiliency research points out:

- Resiliency is not something you either have or don't have. Everyone has the *capacity* for resiliency.
- Resiliency does not develop from internal traits only. Environments provide opportunities and supports that are as important, or even more important, than individual traits. Resiliency develops from an interaction between individual and environmental factors.
- "Gifts" emerge from the experiences of adversity (such as greater compassion, life appreciation and savoring, healthy reprioritization, empathy and a desire to be of service, a stronger spirituality, and self-esteem from having lived through a difficulty, to name a few).
- Resiliency frames a paradox that is true for everyone: Pain and wounds result from great adversity but so does positive human development and transcendence.
- It is possible to create in your life more of the conditions that have been shown to increase resiliency and thereby increase your capacity to move forward in the face of problems, grief, tragedy, and all types of human distress.
- You won't return to the "same normal" as before great adversity, but you can develop a new normal that includes a new way of looking at yourself, at your life, and at the world.
- Resiliency is a process over time. Often the bouncing back process is one of three steps forward and one or two back but the overall trajectory is one of overcoming and integration. This may take only a little time or it may take many years.

Damage vs. Challenge

A more accurate way of describing the journey through great adversity is suggested by the Wolins in their book. Rather than framing the aftermath of trauma, tragedy, or crisis as "damage," they describe it as a "challenge" suggesting a needed shift from the embedded "**damage model**" to a "**challenge model**" that recognizes each person has "a capacity for self-repair" and "strength can emerge from adversity." They emphasize this doesn't mean discounting real emotional pain: all of us should treat our pain, and the pain of others, with compassion and empathetic exploration. But in addition, we must also dig for and document the evidence of resiliency, including even small steps in the direction of successful overcoming.

Perhaps the single most well-known and acclaimed study of resiliency in the face of tremendous adversity is the Kauai study, which began in the 1950s, though results of the study were not published for many years. Pioneering psychologists Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith studied all the children born on Kauai in 1955 and followed them for several decades. They reported the results of the first decades of their study in their book *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*. Of the 700 children in the study, of special interest was the one-third of this group termed “high risk at birth” because these babies had several risk factors. These risks included teen parent(s), parent(s) with addiction and/or mental health issues, living in extreme poverty and/or in situations of domestic violence, and/or receiving little pre-natal care. The remarkable finding was that by middle adulthood the majority of these “high risk babies” were living successful lives. Some showed early resilience while others floundered in adolescence, developing school, addiction, mental health, or criminal behavior problems. Yet eventually, the majority developed into competent and caring adults with the capacity, according to the researchers, to “work well, play well, love well, and expect well.” This study provides an excellent example of the way the resiliency research challenges the idea that because you have had pain, tragedy and trauma in your life, you are doomed to a negative life trajectory. The exact opposite is shown in this study, and others like it.

The Power of Protective Factors

What is the process by which people, such as those studied in the Kauai study and other resiliency research, bounce back? Researchers have found people bounce back because of the power of **protective factors** (explained in detail in chapter three)—internal characteristics (many of which can be developed) and environmental supports/opportunities/conditions that facilitate resiliency.

Werner and Smith concluded in their book *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*, protective factors “make a more profound impact on children who grow up in great adversity” than do “specific risk factors or stressful life events.” In their later book *Journeys from Childhood to Midlife, Risk, Resilience, and Recovery*, they document that even most of the high-risk youths who did develop “serious coping problems in adolescence” staged a resilient recovery by mid-life. This landmark study, which spans more than five decades, describes ways in which resiliency requires environmental supports and opportunities and individual characteristics that propel individuals to accessing the opportunities and supports available.

In this way, internal and environmental protective factors work together in an interactive process. John, now a young man in his 20s, told a personal story of the interaction of individual and environmental protective factors in his early life, at a recent conference on resiliency:

When John was in grade school, his parents were barely making it on his dad’s salary as a bus driver and his mom’s income as a waitress. When he was in 5th grade, his mom died suddenly in a car accident, and the resulting emotional and financial devastation forced John and his father into a traumatic living environment. At the time

he entered 6th grade, John and his dad were living in one room, and sometimes there was electricity and sometimes not, depending on if his dad had paid the bill. John's friend Glen convinced John to tag along to a new afterschool program that had been started as a pilot project in their middle school gym with limited grant funding. John realized from the first day in that program that he needed what was there: Caring, supportive adults, a safe and predictable structure, fun activities that also developed useful life skills, and nutritional afterschool snacks that could serve as dinner. (These were all environmental protective factors.) But John was not enrolled in the program and when he tried to get in, he was told by the director there was no more room. So, he drew upon his innate internal protective factors (which he didn't understand or name until many years later). He kept attending the program anyway despite being told that "there is no room" and one day he hung around so late, the director offered to drive him home. Not only did he accept her ride, but he had her come meet his dad, and when she saw his living situation she said to him, "John, I think we can find a spot for you in the program after all."

The program provided John with environmental protective factors he instinctively recognized from the first day he walked in would help him enormously. But John had to access several of his individual/internal protective factors in order to maneuver himself into a permanent spot in the program, including the perceptiveness/insight to immediately understand the program's value, self-motivation, persistence, and self-esteem (enough to let the director see how he lived).

In the next chapters you will learn how to grow the power of your individual and environmental protective factors. Increasing the power of these factors in your life is a central recommendation from resiliency research and it is something you can do...and must do, in order to increase the power of resiliency in your life.

More than You Realize

My guess, after having dialogued with thousands of people about this concept, is that you have more of both internal and environmental protective factors than you realize. The first step is to recognize your unique protective factors that are already operating for you, and the next step is to strengthen those and figure out how you can use them to bounce back from your current struggles. Then, you can set a goal of adding the power of more protective factors to your life... and this book will show you how to do it.

Making it Real for You

- 1. Finding what has boosted your resiliency.** Think of a time you met a person or attended a new group meeting or found an organization that you instinctively knew you needed to boost your resiliency (even if you didn't know about resiliency at the time).

* Who was that person or what was the group or organization?

- * What did you immediately sense you would get (that you needed) from continued interaction with this person or group?

- * Did you get these things?
If so, how did they help you become more resilient?

- * What personal qualities/characteristics did you draw upon to make sure you had continued access to this person or group?

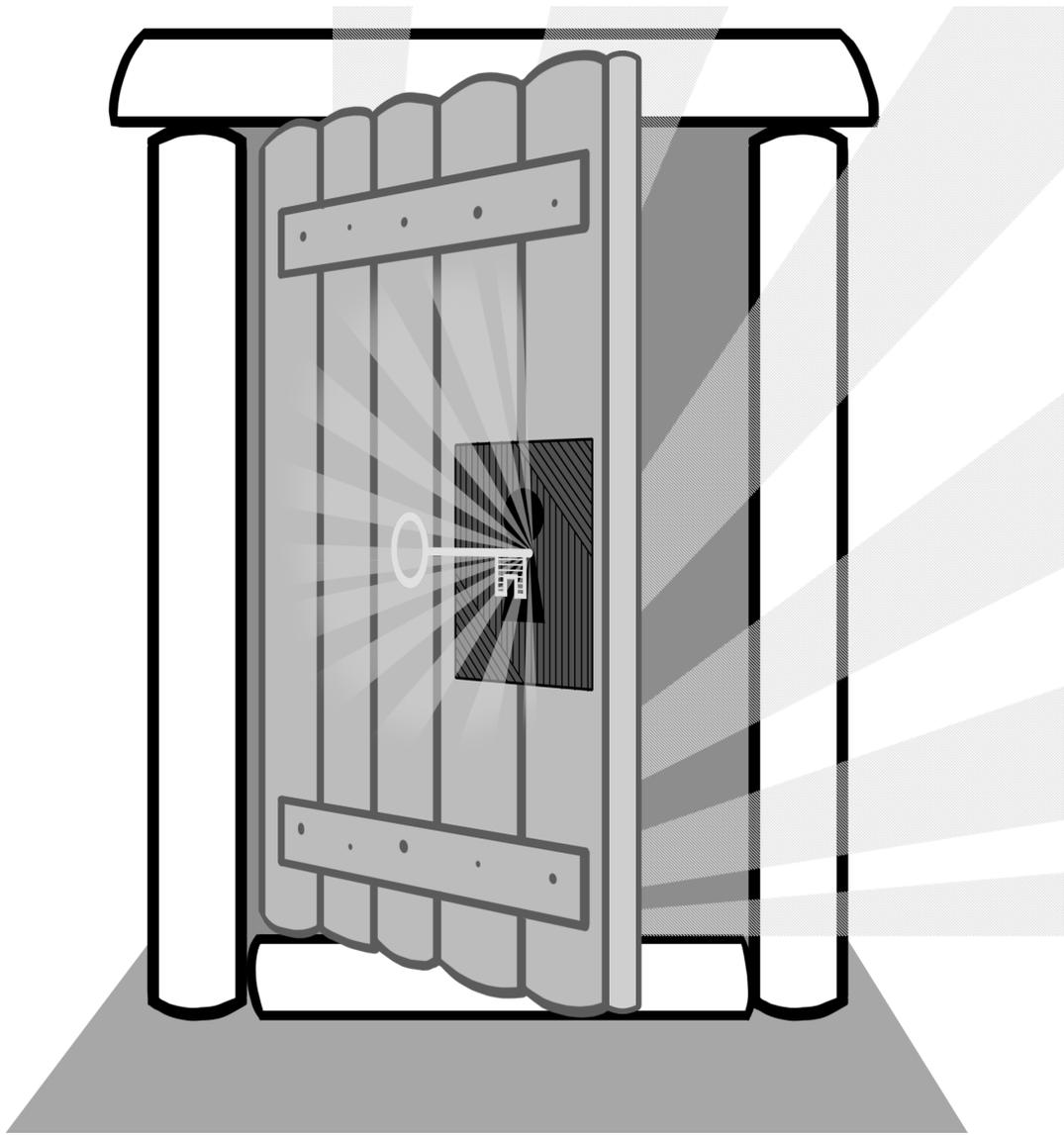
- * Did any more positive personal characteristics develop for you from this experience?

2. **Boosting your resiliency now.** What about *now*? Is there a person, group, or organization that you realize you need to connect with more *now* that would help grow your resiliency?

- * Who is it or what group is it?

- * What do you need to do to create a greater connection?

- * What do you hope to gain that will help you *now* from this person or group?



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