

## Survival of the Sensitive

These days the world is a place of hard knocks. Very few of us are shielded from daily adversity. It can come in very subtle forms: a neighbor fails to wave at us in passing or someone cuts in front of us in line. It can come with crashing and sudden impact: we lose a loved one or we get a medical diagnosis that changes everything. Our lives are dynamic and ever-shifting, what was once reliable is now not. Most of us face a daily dose of uncertainty and have little control over anything or anyone outside ourselves. So how do we continue to move forward, live the life before us and somehow honor our unique personhood?

One way is to work on personal resilience. The American Psychological Association (APA) has long promoted a campaign to foster resilience in the face of terrorism that can also be utilized in an individual way (see [www.APAHelpCenter.org/resilience](http://www.APAHelpCenter.org/resilience)). Resilience is about the ability to spring back and recover quickly from challenging life experiences. Resilient people don't avoid hardship but are able to ultimately surmount them or even become strengthened through them. We all know people who gain from these experiences but there are also those who become discouraged, depressed, angry or bitter. What influences the outcome?

According to the APA, resilient people are optimistic. They are hopeful and aware of active, problem-solving coping strategies. They have a history of applying personal and social resources effectively. Above all, they accept hardship as a common denominator of life and resolve to meet its demands, to even make meaning of it in some positive way. I once asked a friend who was coping with several deaths in her family and personal illness if she ever wondered, "why me?" Her response was, "why not me?"

Some proponents of resilience identify social or community elements as helpful. As an example, caring and supportive relationships can mitigate the effect of stressful situations and create a safe haven for emotional expression. However, it is important to choose those friends or family members who do not impose a time-limited approach. A client recently confided to me that a relative, who had been helping her through a difficult time, told her that "she should be over it by now". It is important to honor individual processes when coping with crisis – some of us are more sensitive than others.

Cultural experience and beliefs can also contribute to resiliency. Some cultures are fatalistic in belief, perceiving adversity as universal and unstoppable rather than personal. Some countries have suffered periodic social unrest, almost "inoculating" its residents in preparing for the next

disaster. Small, periodic “doses” can form a strategy of successful coping strength that can be used to cope well with future events. Communities learn from past crises how to better prepare its citizens, focusing on healthier coping models and ways to decrease negative impacts.

Resilient people have to work on flexibility. This includes attitude as well as action. There are those who have such sensitivity to others that everything is perceived as a slight and the world is seen as unsafe. Here, counseling may be helpful to build self-esteem and obtain a more flexible perspective. Reminding ourselves of personal strengths and past success with adversity can lead to more resourceful coping: if one strategy isn't working we can be open to new and better ones. Sometimes visualizing a positive outcome can go a long way towards its achievement.

Resiliency is also about maintaining personal care and honoring individual needs, no matter whom or what is pressing upon us. We need to take time for ourselves, eat healthy, exercise, sleep and relax. We need to have balance between work and play, social ties and alone time, creative and spiritual pursuits. We need to be able to ask for help when needed as well as help others. If we are particularly sensitive in certain ways (and each of us is!), distancing from people or places that trigger this can assist until we can build personal resilience in that area. In addition, hanging out with “survivors” is a good way to learn how.

Living and being engaged in the world requires healthy coping on an ongoing basis even when life is going well. Take the time now to assess what makes you feel strong and healthy, physically, emotionally and spiritually. If anything is lacking, begin to work on it and you will find coping “reserves” that you never thought you had! Then you can help the rest of us.

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