How to Develop Resiliency

A man can be destroyed but not defeated.

-- Ernest Hemingway

Enjoy what you can; endure what you must.

-- Goethe

Anything that has real and lasting value is always a gift from within.

-- Franz Kafka

All of us need to learn how to more effectively recover from difficult and distressing events in our lives. In other words—how to get back into the saddle after falling off your bike. Yes—you may get scraped and suffer road rash. But these are temporary conditions that set you back a little. Invariably these events painfully remind us of how uncertain life is just as we’re attempting to empower ourselves and insulate ourselves; to lead self-directed and meaningful lives. The research on resiliency and its relationship to longevity indicates that older adults who are resilient age at a slower pace, live longer and they are physically healthier.

Resilience is a strategy characterized by effective adaptation to adverse or distressing events. It’s getting off the canvas at eight before they count you out at ten, and winning the fight by a split decision. It means trusting yourself, knowing that you can reach into your reservoir for the strength to overcome by using your abilities to adapt over time to stressful situations. To do so you have to develop personal strategies that enable you to recover and get on with life. Research on resiliency indicates that resilient individuals share the following characteristics:

1. Resilient individuals have a positive image of themselves, are self-assured and are confident they possess the abilities to overcome difficult situations, are self-disciplined, optimistic, insightful, believe in a better future and they are spiritually connected.
2. These individual are good problem solvers, have good communication skills, are reflective thinkers, resourceful, they know how to take initiative, are self-motivated, acquire strength from being challenged and adversity, and are able to plan ahead.
3. Resilient individuals are able to manage and self-regulate strong and powerful emotions.

So, how do we develop resiliency? I suppose we begin by accepting that change is an inherent and necessary aspect of life. External stressful events compel us to change and we can’t just retreat to our safe, warm and comfortable bedroom and withdraw from everyone. Ducking your head under the covers won’t work either because I’ll pull the covers off. I suggest you invest energy focusing on what you can change.

Another potential self-destructive maneuver is interpreting a crisis in your life as insurmountable. As you know, you can’t entirely avoid distressing events from occurring in your life, but you can modify how you interpret and manage stress. Framing the stressful event in a rational, accurate way, in terms how it will impact you, without over-reacting will enable you to calmly and effectively develop a plan to lessen its impact on your life. In other words, try to keep the stressful event in perspective and not obsess on how it will destroy your life. Be rational here and look at the stressor in the broader context of your life.

Remember, you’re not alone and you have friends. I do hope you’ve got more than one or two friends. If you need a third friend, call me at the institute and I’ll be your friend if you take me to dinner twice a month. I mean it now, I’ll be a trusted, loyal, supportive and available friend. The only reason I’m mentioning the importance of relationships is because it strengthens resilience. You need to know that there are family members, friends and me available to help you in a pinch. The critical element here is knowing that you can rely on your circle of support to assist you when necessary, and knowing this instills hope and faith that you can overcome stressors.

The last thing I’ll say about resilience is that you can discover underlying abilities in yourself by experiencing life difficulties. Many individuals assert they grew emotionally and learned more about their skills and competencies following a stressful event. For some individuals, they grew closer to others and created more meaningful and lasting relationships as a result of overcoming a difficult situation.