

RELATIONSHIPS

Make resilience your best friend

If I could think of one New Year's gift to give family and friends, it would be an ounce of resilience.

We're bouncing back from the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, the BP oil spill, and the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, and have just suffered the unimaginable loss of life in Newtown, Conn. These examples are simultaneously horrifying and inspiring.

But just as dramatic are personal tragedies, such as surviving the holidays after the loss of a child or spouse, dealing with a debilitating accident, or losing money or your job during the recession.

We see over and over that the destiny of a nation or an individual can change on a dime.

During the holidays, President Obama acknowledged the resilience of Joseph Ingenito, a man who put up a giant Christmas tree on his Sandy-devastated block. How do Joseph and others survive disasters and come up smiling?

We see evidence that when pushed beyond what we can handle, with resilience we eventually bounce back to where we were. But is bouncing back the right metaphor? Will anything ever be the same? I doubt if they will ever go back to where they were.

Writing in the book "New Frontiers in Resilient Aging" (2010), sociologist Phyllis Moen and others suggest that some people will return to where they were, others to a much less favorable state, and still others will move forward and "sway the direction of their biographies."

Two very different examples from people I've met illustrate the power of resilience.

After John's car accident he became a paraplegic. With years of rehabilitation, he got his life back on track. During the period of his long stay in a rehab center, he wrote a letter to his mother saying



transitions

he hoped that he could help her face his future as he was doing — with hope, courage and curiosity. Curiosity was such an unusual way to think about his overwhelming challenge.

Sam, a retired vice president of a trade association, illustrates someone who hit a detour in his life plan but bounced forward. In retirement, he wanted to combine his interest in business with coaching by developing a website that would provide baby boomers with information about issues concerning them, such as health, new careers and financial news. In preparation, he returned to school and got a doctorate degree in counseling.

On the day he retired, Sam felt totally prepared, knowing that he was going to develop a business plan, secure a board of directors and identify some sponsors to fund the project. While Sam was developing the project, he discovered a similar website that had just gone online.

Someone had beaten him to the punch.

Sam had a series of reactions. His first thought: "This is terrible. I have spent the last few years on a fool's errand.

Now what?" After some reflection, he felt relief: "Now I don't have to raise the 10 million dollars necessary to get the project off the ground." Then, considering the thought and effort he had already put into the project, he asked himself: "Where is the white space in the project

that beat me? What can I do that is not covered in the existing project?" At first, Sam was not sure what form his modified project would take, but, he said, "Rest assured, it will happen."

There are some guidelines we can follow when faced with a challenge that seems to block our moving forward. Referring to the chapter, "Risk, resilience, and life-course fit: older couples' encores following job loss," the authors found that those resilient couples found an encore "a new lifestyle rather than recovery to the pre-loss status quo."

To get to the encore period, there are ways to think about the setback. Ask yourself:

■ Can I change the devastating situation? Often the answer is no.

■ Can I redefine the situation as Sam did? And in many cases, the answer is yes.

■ Can I start using stress-reducing strategies, such as deep breathing, exercising, meditating? Those strategies are available to everyone.

■ Can I strengthen and broaden my social connections? This is important because these ties provide support and new perspectives.

■ Can I develop a ritual to bolster resilience?

Sam did exactly what experts suggest: He demonstrated resilience by putting a major defeat into broader perspective, strategizing about ways to make this work for him, developing a process for taking action and moving forward, and contacting a lot of people as he decided what to do next.

And Jeff intuitively and unconsciously determined to face his future as an active player and not a passive bystander.

It might be true that resilience is an inborn trait. But for those of us who need it and might not have it, it is comforting to know there are some strategies we can use to become more resilient.

It is a new year, so let's make resilience our best friend as we deal with the ups and downs of 2013.

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