

DO YOU HAVE A SURVIVOR PERSONALITY?

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

When adversity or tragedy strikes, some people rise to the occasion, some crumble and fold, and others barely manage to cope. What causes this distinct difference in people's ability to withstand life's setbacks? Psychologists describe those people who handle adversity well, as being highly resilient. Resilient individuals have a way of reacting to problems with a positive attitude, rather than letting what life throws their way determine the outcome. People with this resilient mental and emotional approach to life not only survive difficult challenges, but they actually thrive as a result.

Author, Al Siebert, first wrote The Survivor Personality, and later, The Resiliency Advantage to drive home the point that our life is not determined by what actually happens to us, but rather, by how we react to events. Resilient individuals have a tendency to respond to major hurdles in life with humor, wisdom, as well as mental and emotional flexibility. They don't get stuck in what should have been; but rather, refocus their efforts on handling what is. If this doesn't describe how you respond to setbacks, don't fret. You can learn how to adopt the mental strategies observed in resilient individuals and make them work for you, too.

Psychologists Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté describe in their book, The Resilience Factor, practical tips for navigating unexpected setbacks, both at home and at work. To become more resilient, you must decide to develop a positive habit of mind. The authors explain seven practical strategies for boosting your resilience by changing the way you habitually think about adversity. Much of their work is based on a premise that our "thinking style" directly determines our emotions and our behavior. The solution is not in adopting just positive thinking, but rather, learning to view setbacks from a helpful perspective. For instance, if you are laid off from your job, it would be unproductive to tell yourself things such as, "This is awful," "I can't handle this," or "Nothing ever turns out good for me," etc. Instead, resilient self-talk might be, "What can I learn from this situation so I'm better prepared in the future," or "I need to search for an opportunity in this situation."

From a work perspective, resilience is a key factor in business success according to a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. When faced with a stressful situation, business success or failure has been linked more to a person's resiliency than to his or her experience or training. I highly recommend the book, Resilience at Work: How to succeed no matter what life throws at you for those who want to learn techniques for creating an attitude that will give them the competitive advantage in their profession.

Whether personally or professionally, the attitude that we bring to life, not what life brings to us, makes the difference in how events turn out. When we think in a positive manner, we create a chain reaction directly from our thoughts, to our emotions, to our behavior and ultimately, to an extraordinary result or outcome. When we develop an optimistic attitude, we not only cope better with adversity, we also bounce back more quickly from negative problems and ordeals. In essence, positive self-talk creates a positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

When you work on building your personal sense of resiliency, you actually raise your tolerance to stress so that previous events that would have stressed you out, no longer have the same grip on you. There are two skills that you need to develop so that you will handle future, stressful situations in a more resilient manner. First, learn to “self-sooth,” by taking deliberate steps to calm yourself down. Oftentimes, this requires the use of traditional stress management techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and healthy self-talk (i.e. “I’ll be OK. I can handle this.”).

A second skill to increase your resilience is to learn “self-confrontation.” This requires that you ask yourself questions to maintain a perspective on the stressful event, such as “Is my sense of self-esteem too heavily invested in this situation, so that if it turns out poorly, I might become too hard on myself?” When you confront yourself, you are helping keep yourself more rational, identifying possible opportunities for growth, and preventing catastrophic thinking from overtaking your mind.

Also, below are some helpful attitudes one should develop to reinforce their resiliency quotient:

- Recognize that we can always learn from failures
- Keep an open mind (i.e. curiosity and playful questioning)
- Focus on positive expectations (optimism and hope)
- Develop more self-reliance

The above mindset doesn’t leave room for a person to focus on feeling victimized by negative circumstances in their life. Victimization can result in mental and physical paralysis that creates a negative chain of events. The goal in creating more resilience in your life is to move more successfully through your life, meeting challenges with a “can do” attitude and emerging from any problems with a greater sense of well being. Your resiliency determines how well you will weather the storms that life blows your way. Storms are part of life. Adapting well is a key to a psychologically healthy life.

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