The Art of Resilience

Research on resilience breaks down the myth that a troubled childhood leaves us emotionally crippled as an adult.

By Hara Estroff Marano, published on May 1, 2003 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016

Think you're a prisoner of a troubled childhood? Think again. You need not go through the rest of your life as an emotional cripple. It is possible to bounce back from adversity and go on to live a healthy, fulfilling life. In fact, more people do it than you may think.

Resilience may be an art, the ultimate art of living, but is has recently been subjected to the scrutiny of science. This much is known so far. At the heart of resilience is a belief in oneself—yet also a belief in something larger than oneself.

Resilient people do not let adversity define them. They find resilience by moving towards a goal beyond themselves, transcending pain and grief by perceiving bad times as a temporary state of affairs.

Experts argue among themselves about how much of resilience is genetic. People do seem to differ in their inborn ability to handle life's stresses. But resilience can also be cultivated. It's possible to strengthen your inner self and your belief in yourself, to define yourself as capable and competent. It's possible to fortify your psyche. It's possible to develop a sense of mastery.

And it's definitely necessary to go back and reinterpret past events to find the strengths you have probably had within all along. Some evidence shows that it's not really until adulthood that people begin to surmount the difficulties of childhood and to rebuild their lives.

One problem is, there are elements of our culture that glorify frailty, says Washington, D.C. psychiatrist Steven Wolin, M.D. There is a whole industry that would turn you into a victim by having you dwell on the traumas in your life. In reality you have considerable capacity for strength, although you might not be wholly aware of it.

Sometimes it is easier to be a victim; talking about how other people make you do what you do removes the obligation to change. And sympathy can feel sweet; talk of resilience can make some feel that no one is really appreciating exactly how much they have suffered.

Wolin defines resiliency as the capacity to rise above adversity—sometimes the terrible adversity of outright violence, molestation or war—and forge lasting strengths in the struggle. It is the means by which children of troubled families are not immobilized by hardship but rebound from it, learn to protect themselves and emerge as strong adults, able to lead gratifying lives.

Resilient people don't walk between the raindrops; they have scars to show for their experience. They struggle—but keep functioning anyway. Resilience is not the ability to escape unharmed. It is not about magic.

Most people mistakenly operate on what Wolin calls "the damage model," a false belief about the way disease is transmitted. It basically says that if your family is having trouble, the chances are high that you will suffer lasting emotional disturbances. It's a prophecy of doom.

Wolin offers survivors of troubled families a more balanced perspective about their past, based on 20 years of his own research on adult children of alcoholics. Most of them, he has found, do not repeat their parents'
drinking patterns. The same is true of adults who have survived families troubled by mental illness, chronic marital disputes, racial discrimination and poverty.

The ground-breaking resilience research of sociologist Emmy Werner, Ph.D., of the University of California, showed that even at the time about a third of kids never seemed to be affected by the grinding poverty, alcoholism and abuse in the homes they grew up in. Of the remaining two-thirds, many were troubled as teens, typically turning to petty crime. But by the time they reached their 30s and 40s, they had pulled themselves together, determined to not repeat their parents' lives.

A troubled family can indeed inflict considerable harm on its children, but resilient people are challenged by such troubles to experiment and respond actively and creatively. Their pre-emptive responses to adversity, repeated over time, become incorporated into their inner selves as lasting strengths.

To the degree that it is learned, resilience seems to develop out of the challenge to maintain self-esteem. Troubled families make their children feel powerless and bad about themselves. Resilience is the capacity for a person to maintain self-esteem despite the powerful influence of the parents.

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It is also possible to be hurt and to rebound at the same time. We human beings are complex enough psychologically to accommodate the two. What the resilient do is refrain from blaming themselves for what has gone wrong. In the language of psychology, they externalize blame. And they internalize success; they take responsibility for what goes right in their lives.

One way they do this, Wolin has found, is to maintain independence. Survivors draw boundaries between themselves and troubled parents; they keep their emotional distance while satisfying the demands of conscience. Resilient children often hang out with families of untroubled peers. As adults, the resilient children of alcoholics marry into stable, loving families with whom they spend a great deal of time.

Survivors cultivate insight, the mental habit of asking themselves penetrating questions and giving honest answers. They also take the initiative. They take charge of problems, stretching and testing themselves.

But they don't do all the work alone. One of the cardinal findings of resilience research is that those who lacked strong family support systems growing up sought and received help from others—a teacher, a neighbor, the parents of peers or, eventually, a spouse. They were not afraid to talk about the hard times they were having to someone who cared for their well-being.

Relationships foster resilience, Wolin contends. Resilient people do the active give-and-take work necessary to derive emotional gratification from others.

Reframing is at the heart of resilience. It is a way of shifting focus from the cup half empty to the cup half full. Wolin accords it a central role in "survivor's pride." He tells the story of a patient, a woman who felt helpless. She had been whipped by her father throughout childhood any time he felt challenged. Wolin instead encouraged her to see herse

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There are lessons in her tale for everyone, Wolin insists. You re-examine your life story to see how heroic your acts were as a child. You go back to an incident, find the strengths, and build self-esteem from the achievement.
Psychologist Edith Grotberg, Ph.D., believes that everyone needs reminders of the strengths they have. She urges people to cultivate resilience by thinking along three lines:

- **I Have**: strong relationships, structure, rules at home, role models; these are external supports that are provided;
- **I Am**: a person who has hope and faith, cares about others, is proud of myself; these are inner strengths that can be developed;
- **I Can**: communicate, solve problems, gauge the temperament of others, seek good relationships—all interpersonal and problem-solving skills that are acquired.