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The Power of Resilience

When tragedy strikes with the death of a loved one, a serious illness or a job loss, some people fall apart, while others adapt to such life-changing events more easily.

Being resilient is what makes the difference.

"Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy or significant stress -- it means bouncing back from difficult experiences," says Patricia O'Gorman, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in East Chatham, N.Y., and a spokeswoman for the American Psychological Association. "We all share a special ability to take charge of our lives. This is what resilience can give us -- the ability to align ourselves with our strengths and to recognize our personal power."

Resilience is used to describe people who lead normal, fulfilling lives despite having experienced trauma or tragedy. These people are resilient because they have the ability to recover from adversity and retain a positive self-image and view of the world.

"People who are resilient accept that they have difficulties, but also know they have inner resources and abilities they have drawn on in the past," says Dr. O'Gorman. "This gives them a starting place that's positive, a place where they can search for solutions to their problems."

Building resilience

Resilience isn't a trait people either have or don't have -- it involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed.

Here are some strategies for building resilience:

- Nurture a positive view of yourself. Develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts.
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. "You can't prevent stressful events from happening, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events," says Dr. O'Gorman. "Try keeping a long-term perspective."
- Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals no longer may be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that can't be changed can help you focus on circumstances you can affect.
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship report better relationships, a greater sense of strength, an increased sense of self-worth and a greater appreciation for life.
- Make connections. Good relationships with family, friends or others are important. Accept help and support from those who care about you.
- Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect good things to happen in your life.
- Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly, get enough sleep, eat a healthful diet and limit alcohol consumption.

Consider writing your thoughts about stressful events in your life. Try meditation and other spiritual practices. Many people find these activities to help them build connections with

others and restore lost hope.

"Becoming conscious of your strengths makes you stronger," says Dr. O'Gorman.
"Resilience increases as you recognize the magnitude of what you've already accomplished and survived in your life and helps you believe you can meet the challenges that lie ahead."

Getting help

Getting help when you need it is crucial in building resilience.

"Beyond caring family members and friends, you may want to turn to support groups, mental health professionals or spiritual advisers if you're not able to bounce back from a setback on your own," says Dr. O'Gorman.

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