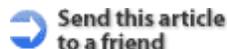


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Resilience: After a Hurricane

The devastation caused by hurricanes can leave people with strong emotions and a strong sense of uncertainty.

Yet people generally adapt well over time to life-changing situations and stressful conditions. What enables them to do so? It involves resilience, an ongoing process that requires time and effort and engages people in taking a number of steps.

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress -- such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences.

Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience. Examples of resilience in the face of hurricanes abound. One woman, looking at the wreckage of what used to be her home, told news crews that she was tough and that the thing that mattered was the lives of her loved ones.

Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.

Resilience Factors & Strategies

Factors in Resilience

A combination of factors contributes to resilience. Many studies show that the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance help bolster a person's resilience.

Several additional factors are associated with resilience, including:

- The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out
- A positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities

- Skills in communication and problem solving
 - The capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses
- All of these are factors that people can develop in themselves.

Strategies For Building Resilience

Developing resilience is a personal journey. People do not all react the same to traumatic stressful life events. An approach to building resilience that works for one person might not work for another. People use varying strategies.

Some variation may reflect cultural differences. A person's culture might have an impact on how he or she communicates feelings and deals with adversity -- for example, whether and how a person connects with significant others, including extended family members and community resources. The hurricanes cut a wide enough swath that several different distinct cultures were impacted.

The good news about resilience is that it can be built using approaches that make sense in each culture.

Some or many of the ways to build resilience that follow may be appropriate to consider in developing your personal strategy.

10 Ways to Build Resilience

Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Even for those separated from their families, connections can be built among friends and acquaintances. There are several tales, for instance, of people evacuating from New Orleans accompanied by -- and emotionally attached to -- fellow evacuees whom they had just met during the flood. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people find that even though they themselves have suffered during Katrina and Rita, helping others makes them feel good about themselves.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't undo the waters or winds of hurricanes, but you can change how you interpret the hurricanes. Try to see beyond the crisis to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of the hurricanes. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly -- even if it seems like a small accomplishment -- that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive action rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.

away. Although the hurricanes uprooted people from their normal routines, establish new as soon as you can, even if they may have to change again if you are moved.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. Reframe how you think about yourself. If you were a survivor of hurricanes, you are a survivor, not a victim of the hurricanes. Acknowledging your own strengths and resourcefulness in dealing with difficult conditions can help you develop confidence in yourself.

Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Although you may want to get up to your usual level of activity, try to get some exercise and try to find something to do that relaxes you, whether it be telling a story to your child or meditating. Taking care of yourself helps keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

Additional ways of strengthening resilience may be helpful. For example, some people find that reflecting about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to trauma or other stressful events through meditation and spiritual practices help some people build connections and restore hope.

The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you as part of your own personal strategy for fostering resilience.

Learning From Your Past

Some Questions to Ask Yourself

Focusing on past experiences and sources of personal strength can help you learn about strategies for building resilience that might work for you. By exploring answers to the following questions about yourself and your reactions to challenging life events, you may discover how you can respond effectively to difficult situations in your life.

Consider the following:

- What kinds of events have been most stressful for me?
- How have those events typically affected me?
- Have I found it helpful to think of important people in my life when I am distressed?
- To whom have I reached out for support in working through a traumatic or stressful experience?
- What have I learned about myself and my interactions with others during difficult times?

- Has it been helpful for me to assist someone else going through a similar experience?
- Have I been able to overcome obstacles, and if so, how?
- What has helped make me feel more hopeful about the future?

Staying Flexible

Resilience involves maintaining flexibility and balance in your life as you deal with stressful circumstances and traumatic events. This happens in several ways, including:

- Letting yourself experience strong emotions, and also realizing when you may need to experience them at times in order to continue functioning
- Stepping forward and taking action to deal with your problems and meet the demands of living, and also stepping back to rest and reenergize yourself
- Spending time with loved ones to gain support and encouragement, and also nurturing yourself
- Relying on others, and also relying on yourself

Places To Look For Help

Getting help when you need it is crucial in building your resilience. Beyond caring family and friends, people often find it helpful to turn to:

Self-help and support groups. Such community groups can aid people struggling with loss, such as the death of a loved one. By sharing information, ideas, and emotions, group members can assist one another and find comfort in knowing that they are not alone in experiencing difficulty.

Books and other publications by people who have successfully managed adverse situations such as surviving cancer. These stories can motivate readers to find a strategy that might help them personally.

Online resources. Information on the web can be a helpful source of ideas, though the quality of information varies among sources.

For many people, using their own resources and the kinds of help listed above may be sufficient for building resilience. At times, however, an individual might get stuck or have difficulty making progress on the road to resilience.

A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist people in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you find you are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living as a result of the hurricane or other traumatic or other stressful life experience.

Different people tend to be comfortable with somewhat different styles of interaction. A person should feel at ease and have good rapport in working with a mental health professional or participating in a support group.

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