How to Fall Seven Times and Stand Up Eight

One day a farmer’s donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided the animal was old, and the well needed to be covered up anyway—it just wasn’t worth it to retrieve the donkey.

He invited all of his neighbors to come over and help him. They all grabbed shovels and began to shovel dirt into the well. At first, the donkey realized what was happening and cried horribly. Then, to everyone’s amazement, he quieted down.

A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well. He was astonished at what he saw. With each shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He would shake it off and take a step up.

As the farmer’s neighbors continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Pretty soon, everyone was amazed as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and happily trotted off!

Life is going to shovel dirt on you—all kinds of dirt. The trick to getting out of the well is to shake it off and take a step up. Each of our troubles is a stepping stone. We can get out of the deepest wells just by not stopping, never giving up! Shake it off and take a step up.

We all face many different adversities throughout our lives. Why is it that some people are able to bounce back from an adverse situation, while others are debilitated by it? Why is it that sometimes we are able to pause and respond thoughtfully, while at other times we are incapacitated or highly reactive to the setback we may be facing? The ability to adapt and respond in a positive way when faced with these stressors and challenges is what we call resilience.

Resilience is “the process of bouncing back and fully recovering in the face of change and stressful situations. Being resilient doesn’t mean a person won’t experience difficulty or stress. However, resilient individuals respond to stress in ways that help them not only recover but grow and thrive. Like the tree whose branches bend and sway in a storm rather than crack under pressure, we have the power to remain flexible and strong amid life’s challenges ... to be resilient!” (Steinhardt, 2020).

Overall, resilience is the ability to deal with a disruption in expectations, a gap between the way someone wants the world to be and what is actually happening.

Resilience is a process that is vital to surviving what life presents when it feels out of control or unfamiliar. The good news is that resilience to deal with our topsy-turvy times can be learned and enhanced. These skills can help us to rise up out of our distress, respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively, and achieve inner strength, courage, and confidence.

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’

You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt

* Japanese Proverb
Three Elements that are Critical to Building Resiliency

1. Challenge
Try to look at difficulties and adversities as challenges, not as immobilizing events. Remember, hurdles, failures, and hardships are lessons to be learned from and create possibilities and opportunities for growth. These challenges are not a negative reflection on one’s abilities or self-worth.

“It’s not what happens to you that determines how far you will go in life; it is how you handle what happens to you.”

-Zig Ziglar

2. Commitment
Commit to becoming deeply involved in meaningful projects, especially those that put you in service to others. Practice staying in the moment with a focus on relationships and causes that are important to you. Focus on the greater good, spiritual beliefs, wellness, and a balanced view of life that includes humor and zeal.

Whatever you can do or dream you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

-Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

3. Self-Awareness and Self-Management
Recognize and accept life’s struggles and take thoughtful action in managing and coping with the challenges. Make the decision to place your efforts where the most impact can be achieved and spend less time worrying about uncontrollable events, which can result in feelings of helplessness. By focusing on what one can influence, feelings of empowerment, passion, and positive energy are increased.

That the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change; but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent.

-Chinese Proverb
Give it a Try: Activities to Grow your Resilience

1. To learn more about your own resilience and strategies to strengthen your resiliency skills, take this Resiliency Quiz.

Resiliency is composed of many qualities, which are the focus of this Resiliency Quiz. Upon completion of your quiz, choose several of the qualities from the list below that you feel are your strengths. Jot down situations in the past where you have shown each of these to be evident. Now, apply the same process to a challenge that you or the person for whom you are caregiving are currently experiencing. Revisit the qualities and consider how you would apply any or all of these to this experience. Ask yourself, “How can I/we approach this challenge to obtain the most productive, positive outcome?”

Qualities of highly resilient people

- Playful childlike curiosity
- Constantly learn from experience
- Adapt quickly
- Have solid self-esteem and self-confidence
- Self-confidence is your reputation with yourself
- Have good friendships and loving relationships
- Express feelings honestly
- Expect things to work out well
- Read others with empathy
- Use intuition and creative hunches

2. Recognize that anxiety is one of the emotions that can impede our resilience.

It is good to examine the source of your anxiety and ask yourself if you are magnifying the threat. If you believe this is the case, analyze the extent to which your anxiety is playing a role and in what ways you can manage the threat. We all experience a variety of stressors that contribute to our anxiety. Not all stress is bad. The key is that we want to be inspired and motivated by our stress, not debilitated by it. Each of us are capable of changing our perceptions, which can help us to feel less stressed and anxious.

Now, think of a situation in which you tend to exaggerate the risk of negative outcomes and your ability to manage the situation. Ask yourself these questions:

- In the end, did I anticipate negative outcomes that never happened?
- Did I make it harder on myself by anticipating the worst-case scenario? How did this make me feel?
- Do I notice any physical symptoms that impede my ability to accomplish tasks?
- What resiliency characteristics can I tap into to help myself cope with this situation?
- What are the things that give me a true sense of accomplishment? What activities bring me joy and help me to feel less burdened?

There are more things to alarm us than to harm us, and we suffer more often in apprehension than reality.

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca
3. Realize that the future is unknowable, and there are no guarantees.

Resilience requires us to accept some levels of ambiguity and our inability to predict the future. When facing adversity, it is essential to recognize that we have more influence and control over our thoughts and perceptions than we might give ourselves credit for.

Describe a situation that troubles you or the person for whom you are caregiving. What are the various factors contributing to this challenging situation? Are there people who are making the situation seem more difficult? Draw a continuum line with a scale from 0 to 10. Place a mark on the line delineating the level of influence or control you feel you have over the situation. Are there ways of influencing the situation that you may have overlooked?

Do you have more influence than you perceive? Do you have less influence that you hope for? How can you move your mark higher on the continuum to increase your influence? How can you move it lower to let go of that which you can’t control?

*When you have got an elephant by the hind leg and he’s trying to run away, it’s best to let him run.*

- Abraham Lincoln

4. Think of a few people you know whom you believe are highly resilient.

Consider the following list of resiliency characteristics, and think about which of these they possess:

- ability to adapt and bounce back
- empathy
- gratitude
- solid, healthy relationships
- self-awareness
- self-care
- self-management
- inner strength
- courage
- confidence
- sense of purpose
- ability to balance humor with seriousness
- an attitude of positivity and optimism
- willingness to look for possibilities
- acceptance of what is and ability to let go
- ability to embrace change and reframe an adverse situation when necessary
- creative thinking
- perseverance/commitment.

Think of a specific challenge or concern facing you or the person for whom you are caregiving. How do you think each of these resilient people might use these characteristics to approach your challenge? If possible, chat with them about this.

In your own life, who might you turn to for supportive guidance and/or a fresh perspective about an issue that troubles you?
5. Increase simple physical activity and mindfulness practices.

Even something as simple as breathing can help you to relax and let go of troubling, anxious thoughts and physical manifestations of stress. You need not wait until you feel tense to use these tools.

- Try doing some simple, basic yoga poses such as ragdoll.
- Another good relaxation method is balloon breathing, which does not take planning, time, or a change in your schedule.
- A third relaxing activity is guided imagery.
- Finally, take time out to do any physical activity that you find enjoyable such as walking, digging in your garden, or dancing around your room!

6. Practice gratitude.

Write a thank you note to someone who believed in you, inspired you, supported you, or has made you smile. Make sure to note what the person did that was so meaningful, what kind of effort it required, and how you benefitted. Consider keeping a gratitude journal to encourage and enhance your gratitude practices.

Tips to Power Up Resilience for Families and Caregivers from The Crisis Prevention Institute

- Remain calm, see hope and possibility, and bring your energy to resolving a problem.
- Maintain the confidence in your abilities to take action in challenging situations and believe you can use these challenges to learn, grow, and develop.
- Prioritize the important aspects of the challenge and cut through the ambiguity; this allows you to conserve and direct your energy to achieve the best outcomes.
- Use creativity to identify a range of options using new and perhaps unusual strategies and to see humor in dark times.
- Reach out to connect with others to resolve an issue better handled with a combination of thoughts and expanded solutions.
- Practice risk-taking by taking small risks and adjusting solutions based on success.
- Role model how to bring a positive attitude and a set of creative solution-finding skills to the challenge.
My Wish for You: The Story of The Carrot, The Egg, and The Coffee Bean
(from Jack Canfield’s Principles of Success)

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed that as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil, without saying a word.

In about twenty minutes, she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl.

Turning to her daughter, she asked, “Tell me, what do you see?” “Carrots, eggs, and coffee,” the daughter replied.

Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma. The daughter then asked, “What does it mean, mother?”

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity—boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

“Which are you?” she asked her daughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?”

Think of this: Which am I? Am I the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do I wilt and become soft and lose my strength? Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, have I become hardened and stiff? Does my shell look the same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart?

Or am I like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavor. If you are like the bean, when things are at their worst, you get better and change the situation around you. When the hour is darkest and trials are their greatest, do you elevate yourself to another level? How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?

May you have enough happiness to make you sweet, enough trials to make you strong, enough sorrow to keep you human, and enough hope to make you happy. The happiest of people don’t necessarily have the best of everything—they just make the most of everything that comes along their way.
Helpful Online Resources and Reading for Building Resilience

Virtual Calming Room

The Mindfulness Journal

The Positive Pledge

Positive Psychology

Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, by Brene Brown

Resilient: How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength, and Happiness, by Rick Hanson

References


About the Author

Sara Egorin-Hooper is the Project Coordinator of the Reimagining Professional Learning/Opportunity Grant at the IDEALS Institute. Prior to joining the IDEALS Institute, Sara was the Supervisor of Teaching and Learning in the Department of Special Education of Baltimore County Public Schools where she supervised district-wide programs for students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and a range of neurodevelopmental differences. It has been her life’s work to focus on the many strengths, gifts, and capabilities that all people possess. Sara is a proud Possibilitarian who continually works toward building Possibilitopia. It is her fundamental belief that we are all connected, and that each unique individual needs to be recognized as an important, valued, welcomed, and contributing member of the school community and the community at large.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to Susie Swindell, Paula Simon, and Beth Boyle for their generosity of time, their kind willingness to give focused and honest feedback; their laughter and supportive encouragement; and for truly being my pillars of resilience!