

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Resilience

Strategies for strengthening your "resilience muscles"

THE IMAGES OF DEVASTATION AND CHAOS in the wake of Hurricane Katrina have provoked a spectrum of feelings in those of us at a safe distance. Certainly, people in this and many other communities have been generous in responding with food, money, supplies and actions. This response arises out of compassion and empathy: many people here have experienced catastrophic losses to forest fires, flood, random acts of violence and the indiscriminate unkindnesses of life. These people can understand what it is to lose something precious and to heal with a stronger and more resilient heart and spirit. Medical science has created many ways of inoculating us against disease. Yet, there's no way to inoculate the heart against pain and suffering, nor would it be possible to do so without sacrificing a crucial experience of being human. Nonetheless, by exercising the mental muscles that support resilience we can be better prepared to cope and to get through a difficult time rather than getting mired and stuck in it.

The first exercise is the practice of normalizing change. Every day, we walk a balance beam between avoiding change and embracing it. The face in the mirror this morning is not the face that was in the mirror five years ago. The same holds true for the body on the scale and the hair on our heads. Inside those heads, where we are less able to see clearly, brain cells are establishing new patterns of connection with each experience and old, unused patterns are weakening and fading. Against this background awareness of physical comings and goings we attempt to create firm ground by holding on to what we can. A recent newspaper article on hoarding played the spotlight on an extreme version of this effort. To a lesser degree, though, we all tend to cherish our "stuff": the basics of life and the luxuries, as well as sentimental memorabilia.

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The transience of such attachments becomes clear in accounts of those forced to evacuate with nothing but the clothing they wore. It's possible to normalize change by deliberately stepping into a dance of coming and going, having and giving away. One entry practice is exchange: every time something new comes into the home, something old goes out. While this has the practical benefit of maintaining equilibrium in the use of space, it also requires an individual to periodically assess what she's holding on to and why, what she wants to and will let go of. Few cherished items have achieved that status because of intrinsic value, so it's useful to periodically consider why a quarter of the basement is devoted to housing the clothes that will never again fit and- even if they did- would be so out of style as to be laughable. What do these items represent? What do they honor? What do they dishonor? What would letting go create space to do? Whatever we ultimately do with the items in question, the practice of periodic re-evaluation helps tone the mental muscles that place all objects in the category of "impermanent stuff to be enjoyed for a while and then let go." Faced with a significant change such as a divorce, clients have found this practice to be a useful beginning in reclaiming their own lives and space and letting go of the ghosts of the past which cling to the furniture and kitchen utensils and much-played CD's.

Doing this exercise with ordinary articles can be fairly easy to learn. How can we practice "coming and going" mind with relationships and cherished people? Surely I am not suggesting we cut old friends from our lives because we've made new friends! What is possible (and much kinder) is to reflect periodically on how we and the people in our lives have changed, how relationships have evolved, some getting closer and some more distant. Similarly, it's possible and valuable to consider which relationships have become habits and to look at how we treat the people we consider "cherished". Does present behavior suggest an underlying assumption that this person will always be with us and that we can practice benign neglect or even bad behavior because there's always a future in which to make it up? What relationships do we take for granted? This, too, is a symptom of a false assumption that the individual and the relationship will "always be there." By paying closer attention to the truth of relationships in the present, we build an emotional storehouse of strong positive memories which can sustain us when faced with loss. When my friend of many years died in the events of 911, I spent hours

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on the phone with his widow. Understandably, for the first months she wept and grieved and was bitterly angry and bereft. In their marriage of only a few years, she was a devoted and deeply caring wife. She cherished David and he cherished her and their time together was spent appreciating and celebrating the gift of each other. When he died, stories and notes came from his many colleagues, anecdotes of David's kindnesses, thoughtful acts, playfulness. Gradually, her anger and grief were more and more balanced by fond and grateful memories. She began to think about a fitting memorial and tribute to the kind man he was. She was able to draw on a thousand moments when they were present for each other to turn from bitterness toward gratitude and these sustained her resilience and ultimate healing.

The final practice is what I call "stubborn wisdom". There's much to be learned from the well-known prayer: "Lord, help me to accept the things I cannot change, to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." This stubborn wisdom practice is the practice of looking for what we can do, what we can control instead of spending all of our energy "pushing the river", trying to control what's outside of our scope of influence. What does stubborn wisdom look like? Think of Christopher Reeve, a handsome, fit movie star on the rise who was rendered severely disabled in body by a riding accident. Mr. Reeve couldn't change what had happened to his body. He did change what he could by becoming a spokesman for a cause and trying to help himself and others in similar conditions. Closer to home, when someone in this community loses everything in a house fire, neighbors can't recover burned family photos or lost pets but they can and do band together to raise funds to begin the renewal process. One of my clients, deeply saddened by the images of the hurricane aftermath, reported that for a while she felt overwhelmed in the face of such enormous losses. Then she realized what she could contribute and became a force to motivate constructive actions on the campus and in the community where she teaches. Stubborn wisdom comes from refusing to be stopped or overwhelmed by the enormity of life. It is cultivated by a determination to persist and by knowing the best and most likely point of entry to effect change in defiance of the odds.

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As the weather gets cooler in the High Plains, we'll start to think about preparing the winter kit for the car, and anticipating overnight freezes in the garden. It's also a good time to begin cultivating resilience; life's challenges know no season.

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