The Power and Courage of "Superman":
Exemplifying the Concept of "Personal Control"
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As many of my readers are aware, for the past twenty years I have had an interest in how people develop and maintain a positive attitude even in the face of intense adversity. This interest has been expressed in many of my writings including several books co-authored with my colleague and dear friend Dr. Sam Goldstein. Our latest book, "The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life," to be released this month, describes the steps each of us can take as adults to nurture a resilient mindset and lead a resilient lifestyle.

Last year I devoted two monthly articles to the theme of "personal control." It is a concept that provokes much self-reflection as evidenced by the many comments and questions I continue to receive about its meaning. As I have often noted, one of the prominent characteristics of resilient people is their ability to focus on what they have control over, devoting little time or energy to factors that are beyond their sphere of influence. They take responsibility and ownership for their own lives. Resilient people do not seek satisfaction and happiness by asking or waiting for someone else to change first but rather consider, "What is it that I can do differently to change the situation?"

This attitude is rooted in the belief—supported by research—that each of us can learn to interpret and respond to events in ways that reinforce hope and resilience rather than despair. This is not to suggest that individuals beset by pessimism and helplessness lack the fortitude to better their condition or outlook on life, but rather that many do not appreciate the power they possess to alter self-defeating perceptions that they may have. They often find themselves trapped in "negative scripts," not realizing that they are capable of assuming authorship for their own lives. As a therapist I have witnessed the transformation that occurs when people finally understand that their attitudes as well as the behaviors that follow from these attitudes are not fixed in stone.

To emphasize this inner power I frequently cite Dr. Victor Frankl, a renowned psychiatrist and survivor of a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. When I quoted him in one of my articles last year, many people wrote to tell me they were very moved and

reassured by his words. Thus, I would like to include them again. He poignantly captured the significance of personal control when he wrote:

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl's words represent an important philosophy by which to lead our lives. Recently I was reminded of this philosophy during a plane trip. The USAirways magazine Attache featured an interview with Christopher Reeve written by Diane Cyr. As most of us know, Reeve, an accomplished actor, gained stardom portraying Superman in several movies. Ironically, eight years ago he suffered a devastating accident during a horseback-riding event. He was thrown from the horse and instantly the "Man of Steel" became a quadriplegic, requiring a ventilator to take even a single breathe.

During the past few years I have watched several television interviews with Reeve and have admired his positive outlook. During one interview he candidly revealed that immediately following his accident he questioned whether it would be better if he just died. In subsequent years, while still experiencing at times an understandable sadness, he adopted a mindset filled with hope, a mindset that permitted him to continue to act in and direct movies, to give speeches, and to become a very visible advocate for increased funding for research into spinal cord injuries. Five years ago he astounded many by achieving some hand movement as well as sensation over much of his body. He is now capable of breathing for up to 90 minutes without the aid of a ventilator. All of these are remarkable accomplishments given the extent of his injuries.

In the interview in Attache, Reeve articulated several of the key ingredients necessary to move from a position of self-pity and helplessness to one of empowerment. I would like to share Reeve's thoughts, not just for the sake of highlighting the courage and resilience of this impressive man, but in hopes that all of us can learn from and apply his attitude in our own lives. His ideas resonate with the suggestions Sam Goldstein and I have offered in our writings.

1. Don't look for the reason. I have sometimes referred to this as the "Why me?" burden. It is very natural for people who have experienced pain and trauma to wonder, "Why did this happen to me or to my loved ones or friends?" A boy with ADHD once asked me, "Why did God choose me to be the one with ADHD?" A man whose wife filed for divorce lamented, "Why did this happen to me?" Parents of a preschool child who died of a brain tumor were "haunted" by the question, "Why would this happen to such a lovely child who had so many years ahead of her?" While a "why me?" attitude is not unexpected as part of an initial response to hardship or tragedy, if it becomes a permanent fixture of our mindset, we are less likely to find solutions to our problems and more likely to succumb to ongoing self-pity.

Reeve perceptively observes, "People say 'there's a reason' because it allows them to believe life is not chaos, that it's not random. I don't agree with that. I think life is absolutely random. I wasn't injured for a reason. I was injured in a freak accident." However, Reeve does not equate a lack of reason as implying that you cannot derive meaning from a calamity. He notes that it's okay to be angry at what has occurred, but then contends, "After you survive a traumatic event, the challenge is to make sense of it, and to find a new and perhaps different way of living a meaningful life. I believe one of the key indicators of emotional health is the ability to function well in the present and make plans for the future. I'm able to do that. I can choose to stop thinking, 'I could have been sailing on this day five years ago,' and start thinking, 'What am I going to do today?'"

Cast in other terms, Reeve is proclaiming that he can choose what script to write for his life even when confronted with seemingly overwhelming obstacles. He offers the thought-provoking analysis, "I believe paralysis is a choice. I am literally paralyzed, but in many ways I'm free. A lot of people are free of physical limitations, but paralyzed by fear and anxiety, depression, a sense of helplessness. They don't believe their lives will improve. And they're as good as paralyzed."

2. Find solutions, not limitations. Reeve visits other individuals who have experienced spinal-cord injuries. He has found that while just offering a shoulder may be comforting, what is very helpful is to provide information that encourages solutions. In his travels he describes research being done to cure paralysis as well as physical

interventions he is using. If one wears blinders and looks only at limitations, it restricts possibilities. Reeve is not recommending Pollyannish optimism but rather realistic solutions to daunting challenges. As he says, "Being ill or disabled is a problem. And while you make your own decision about how to address the problem, I want people to be aware of what they can do in the situation."

3. Go ahead and wallow—within reason. I appreciate that Reeve highlighted this attitude. Being resilient does not imply that one denies sadness or anger, but rather that these emotions are managed so that they do not entrap us. Not surprisingly, Reeve reports that he often dreams at night of being engaged in physical activities such as sailing or skiing. The reality of his paralysis when he awakens can be very depressing. For several years he spent the first 20 minutes of each morning permitting himself to cry or dream about the time before his accident. However, once the 20 minutes passed, he moved ahead with physical therapy, or directing a play, or involving himself in his Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. "All of my schedule requires me to stay in the present time. There's so much to do."

Reeve recognized that tears were a necessary part of his emotional recovery, but he imposed limits on these tears, not allowing anguish to interfere with following a more productive path. In essence, he did not deny his feelings, but he chose to establish limits on those emotions that would impede him from moving ahead. He practiced personal control.

4. Get busy. Reeve advocates becoming engaged in both physical activity and activism. He believes that his ongoing physical therapy has helped him to recover movement in parts of his body that were thought impossible when he first became paralyzed. In the Attache article, Reeve noted that his 71-year-old mother rows single sculls each morning, which has led to triumph over her lifelong asthma.

Activism involves fighting for a cause, vision, or ideal. As examples, Reeve has launched a recycling program in New York City and battled for stem-cell research. Activism provides meaning and purpose to one's life, a vital component of resilience and stress hardiness. When purpose and passion are absent, we become vulnerable to allowing pity and doubt to dominate our lives. It's important for each of us to prioritize our values and to ensure that we allocate time and energy to those activities that reflect

our values. If we do not live and practice these values, we will lead empty lives filled with dissatisfaction.

5. Don't look for the quick fix. Reeve appreciates that most important goals take time to reach. Long-term goals are best met when broken into small-term achievements. This may be obvious, but in my clinical practice I have spoken with many well-intentioned individuals who articulated only long-term goals and when these were not achieved immediately they fell prey to discouragement and defeatism. As a consequence, many abandoned the pursuit of their goals, believing that they were not capable of reaching them. If only they had realized that seemingly small accomplishments provide the scaffolding upon which a larger, sturdier structure is constructed.

Given Reeve's movie star status, he has received well-deserved publicity for his positive attitude and achievements since his accident. He has benefited from the love and support of his wife and countless friends and admirers. However, let us not forget that there are many individuals who are not in the limelight who display the same sense of hope and perseverance as Reeve when confronted with great adversity. Similar to Reeve, they focus on what they have control over including the attitude they adopt in their darkest moments. They are active participants in determining the course of their life, recognizing that their existence can be filled with dignity and resilience.

It may be helpful to reflect upon your own life as you consider the principles that comprise Reeve's hopeful attitude. You may also wish to remember a statement expressed by Robert F. Kennedy during his ill-fated 1968 presidential campaign, a statement paraphrased from the writings of George Bernard Shaw:

"Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and ask, 'Why not?'"