

## **Further Thoughts about Resilience**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Last month I discussed a Working Paper about the topic of resilience that was published by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. It represented the impressive collaboration of a multidisciplinary team chaired by Dr. Jack Shonkoff, Director of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital. A key finding of the report was, “Resilience depends on supportive, responsive relationships and mastering a set of capabilities that can help us respond and adapt to adversity in healthy ways.”

This statement resonated with my beliefs, given the emphasis I have placed on the power of the relationship in nurturing resilience and the importance of the development of a “resilient mindset” with accompanying skills (e.g., problem-solving, self-discipline, learning from and coping with setbacks and mistakes, enriching the well-being of others), in contributing to a more optimistic, purposeful, accomplished life.

I had not planned to write a follow-up article about resilience this month but was prompted to do so by a couple of recent occurrences that focused on this theme. I’ve discovered that anytime I hear or read about ideas related to leading a meaningful, compassionate, resilient life, it reinforces my own interest in the topic and prompts me to learn and write more about these themes.

### **A Podcast with Chris Brogan and Eric Greitens**

The first occurrence was listening to a podcast conducted by an individual I greatly admire, Chris Brogan (<http://www.chrisbrogan.com>). I was first introduced to Chris by my son Rich, who is founder and president of flyte new media, a web design and internet marketing company located in Portland, Maine. Rich organizes an annual social media conference, *Agents of Change*, in Portland, and since I am one of his clients as well as his father, I always attend. Similarly, my wife Marilyn also attends, not only as Rich’s mother, but as a client—flyte handles the weekly blog she writes reviewing mystery books (<http://www.marilynsmysteryreads.com>).

I found that many of the presentations at the *Agents of Change* conferences had greater relevance for my personal and professional life than I originally anticipated. I

understood the reasons for this relevance even more after reading Daniel Pink's intriguing book *To Sell Is Human* (Pink is also author of two of my other favorite books, *A Whole New Mind* and *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*). Pink reminds us that we are all "selling" things, whether in the form of ideas, causes, or products and rather than have hesitations about "selling," we should understand its positive impact.

Rich had spoken highly of Chris, who is CEO of Owner Media Group. He is well-known and respected for his innovative work in the area of social media and related fields and has consulted with numerous organizations. The first time I heard Chris speak at Rich's conference his topic was based on his new book *The Impact Equation*, co-authored with Julien Smith. The ideas housed within social media and marketing are somewhat new to me, although I am learning more about these areas. (Rich did convince me to have a twitter account and to tweet—the word tweet still makes me smile—and to have a professional Facebook page in addition to one for my immediate family.) In listening to Chris, not only did I become more acquainted with a new field, but afterwards I told Chris that I found his ideas to be rooted in a framework with which I was familiar, one that emphasized connections to others, effective communication, and the significance of articulating and adhering to our values.

Since that initial meeting I have followed Chris through his blogs, writings, and podcasts. The podcast I recently heard was conducted with Dr. Eric Greitens, a former Navy Seal, Rhodes Scholar, boxing champion, and humanitarian. Greitens' book *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life* was published this past March, and Chris' interview was based on the book. I enjoyed listening to this podcast, not only given my own interests and writings in the field of resilience but by the wisdom and compassion expressed by Greitens. I immediately ordered a copy of the book and will most likely devote a future article to what he has written. Greitens' comments elicited many reflections about resilience. The podcast may be heard by clicking on the following link: <http://directory.libsyn.com/episode/index/id/3561411>.

### **A *Time* Magazine Article**

The second event that triggered this follow-up article about resilience was a piece that appeared in the latest issue of *Time* magazine titled "Bounce Back" by Mandy

Oaklander. The subtitle read, “Scientists Now Know Why Some People Respond so Well from Setbacks. They Also Know How the Rest of Us Can Be More Like Them.” Even more than the title, the subtitle caught my attention. In my writings with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein we have advocated that what we have learned from the lives of individuals who have successfully handled significant adversity can be applied to enhance the lives of those who have been fortunate enough not to have experienced great hardship.

The *Time* article focused on the work of psychiatrists Drs. Steven Southwick at the Yale School of Medicine and Dennis Charney, Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai in New York City. They are co-authors of *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges*. Based on her interview with Southwick and Charney, Oaklander writes, “Resilience is essentially a set of skills—as opposed to a disposition or personality type—that make it possible for people not only to get through hard times but to thrive during and after them. Just as rubber rebounds after being squeezed or squished, so do resilient people.”

The article highlights studies that examine resilience and brain structure. “And thanks to modern imaging, scientists can peer inside the brain in real time to see how, and to what extent, stressful situations change the structure and function of the brain. They are also learning that training for resilience can change the brain to, well, make it more resilient.” Oaklander cites the work of Dr. Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as Dr. Martin Paulus, scientific director and president of the Laureate Institute for Brain Research in Tulsa, Oklahoma, both of whom are involved in identifying those parts of the brain specifically implicated in helping people cope more effectively with stress.

This brain research is not only intriguing in its own right, but if in fact people can engage in activities that strengthen parts of the brain that nurture resilience, then a key task is to identify those activities. Charney cautions, “For resilience, there’s not one prescription that works. You have to find what works for you.” He also emphasizes we must focus on those resilience-building skills that we are most likely to stick with in both good times and bad. As I reviewed the activities offered by those interviewed for the *Time* magazine article, I noted that they parallel recommendations Sam Goldstein and I

have outlined in our books, especially *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*.

### **Activities to Nurture Resilience**

In addition to engaging in mindfulness and meditation—two very prominent activities that deserve entire articles on their own—the following are other activities listed in the *Time* piece that have been found to be beneficial in promoting resilience:

*Be quick to reach out for support when things go haywire.* I place this first since it captures what I believe to be one of the most important ingredients in resilience, one highlighted in the report I described last month, namely, the essential role of having supportive people in your life. Southwick observes, “Very few highly resilient individuals are strong in and by themselves. You need support.” Oaklander adds, “There are even neurobiological elements to social support. When people are exposed to a stressor in a lab, their heart rate and blood pressure don’t go up quite as much as if a friend is in the room as they do if they’re alone.” Research shows the same is true when one is petting an animal.

*Try to find meaning in whatever stressful or traumatic thing has happened.* In my writings about “commitment,” one of the components of stress hardiness, I have encouraged that we search for ways in which we can transform the traumatic occurrence into something that brings purpose to our lives. There are numerous examples of individuals doing this, whether it’s the women who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving following the deaths of their own daughters to drunk drivers, or people starting charities in memory of loved ones who lost their lives to violence, or families establishing foundations for children with special needs given their own family experience. This point also ties to another area about which I have written a great deal, namely, contributing to the well-being of others as a source of compassion and resilience.

*Try to maintain a positive outlook.* This is easier said than done. Some may feel it is similar to suggesting to a person who is depressed, “Just cheer up.” However, I believe that we can go beyond the “just cheer up” message and initiate steps to reinforce a positive outlook. In difficult situations we can ask if there is anything we can learn from the experience. We can focus on how best to cope with the situation. One useful

technique is to write down on a daily or weekly basis the things in our life for which we are grateful so that our entire perception is not consumed with negativity.

*Find an exercise regime you'll stick to.* As most of my readers are aware, this is a recommendation I have made in many of my previous articles. I have quoted the work of psychiatrist Dr. John Ratey and his books *Spark* and *Go Wild* as examples of the impact of exercise on our emotional and physical well-being. We need not engage in exercise as if we were Olympic athletes. Rather, we can discover a regimen that is more realistic and achievable for us. It may help to have an exercise partner as a source of motivation.

*Don't beat yourself up or dwell on the past.* I realize that achieving this goal requires much energy, but I am constantly reminded of my March, 2013 website article that focused on the New England Centenarian Study. In that article I quoted a woman in the study who asserted, "True maturity is living in peace with that which you cannot change." Her pronouncement captures an essential belief held by people who are resilient, namely, when difficult situations arise we must be careful not to blame the situation or others or ourselves, but rather ask, "What is it that I can do differently to cope with what has occurred?" Such a perspective should be seen as empowering ourselves to make changes in our attitude and behavior. People who are seeking their happiness by someone else changing first will probably never be happy.

*Recognize what makes you uniquely strong—and own it.* Almost 35 years ago I began to use the metaphor "islands of competence." At that time I realized that many of my questions and comments in my clinical practice focused on the problems people were having and how to "fix" them. This was known as a "deficit model," a prominent model in the field of mental health when I began my career. While we must not ignore problems in our lives, I found that it was essential for us to identify and engage in our areas of strength. I advocated that parents and teachers do the same for their children and students. It is difficult to cope effectively with challenges and be resilient if we primarily attend to our deficits rather than our strengths. To place the spotlight on deficits serves to intensify pessimism and helplessness rather than to nourish optimism and hope.

### **What Is the Easier Path?**

I believe that our knowledge of the factors that contribute to a "resilient mindset" as well as the strategies associated with this mindset have become more defined and

realistic. As Charney wisely advises, “For resilience, there’s not one prescription that works. You have to find what works for you.” Thus, some individuals can begin by taking a 15-20 minute walk each day, others can volunteer an hour a week, while still others can write in a “gratitude journal” on a regular basis.

As a woman once said to me at the end of one of my presentations about resilience and family relationships, “You have some thoughtful ideas and strategies, but they are not easy to do.” I thanked this woman for her comment and agreed that many of my suggestions for leading a more resilient life and maintaining close relationships could be challenging. However, I then shared the following thought, “While what I discussed in my talk might not be easy to accomplish, what really turns out not to be easy is to do none of the things I have suggested and to experience the negative consequences that follow. I believe that what I have recommended is actually the easier path to take.”

Since I hold the belief that we are authors of our own lives and have far more control over our attitude and response to situations than we realize, I also believe we have the ability to make those choices that will cultivate a resilient mindset and resilient behaviors. Let us wisely choose the path we take.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**