

**Excepted from the book , It's not the End of the World: Developing Resilience in Times of Change; Joan Borysenko, Hay House, 2009.**

### **The Three Secrets of Resilience**

Get a lot of sleep, a lot of exercise. Eat real good.  
Say your prayers. And be good to your dogs.

-Mickey Rourke

In response to the question, "What is your advice to survive and come back in hard times?"<sup>1</sup>

I was sitting in a CNN green room in front of a plate of stale bagels. A green room, in case you've never been in one, isn't green at all. It's just an ordinary waiting room populated by nervous people waiting to be guests on radio or TV shows. My first book, *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* had won me an interview on *Sonya Live*, an intelligent and lively talk show hosted by psychologist Dr. Sonya Friedman. Sitting right next to the bagels was her most recent book, *Smart Cookies Don't Crumble*. I tried to take the witty title to heart, but the sound of the blood pounding in my ears was a distraction.

*Lets not crumble here, Joan*, I thought. *This interview is not a disaster-in-the-making, it's an opportunity to get your message out.* Somehow I picked my way out onto the set, circumnavigating the maze of snaking wires that don't show up on your TV screen. Wiping beads of cold sweat from my face, I took a seat across from Sonya. She was composed, poised, and interested in my topic of mind-body medicine. And, of course, she was a pro who had been sitting in the catbird seat for years. I, on the other hand, was a rank amateur in a completely new situation...one with the potential to humiliate me from coast to coast. Worse still, my mother was watching.

Although I began the interview in a mild state of terror, by the end I'd managed to relax and come back home to myself. I not only survived. I even had a little fun. This bouncing back from stress is called *resilience*. It's a graceful way of flowing through life, adapting to different circumstances with the ease of water assuming the shape of whatever container it's poured into. Resilience is also a courageous affirmation of life in the face of more serious stresses like illness, divorce, job loss, financial setback, abuse, war, and terror.

## Stress and Resilience

Lets take a closer look at how stress and resilience work. Think of a rubber band. When it's stretched, there's stress on the rubber. But when you release the stress, it snaps back into shape. That's the most basic kind of resilience. But if the rubber band is stretched for a long time, it begins to fatigue and is more likely to give out.

The same is true for the human body and mind. We give out when we're stressed for a long time. Studies estimate that 75-90% of visits to the family doctor are for conditions caused or made worse by stress. These include headaches, digestive disturbances, infertility, memory loss, heart problems, allergies, high blood pressure, immune disorders, blood sugar control for diabetics, back pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression, and many other illnesses.

When an emergency calls for sudden stretching, most healthy people can rise to the challenge. Imagine that you've just tripped over the cord to your computer and it goes flying off the table. Without having to think about it, your body releases adrenalin and you have the sudden agility of an outfielder for the Boston Red Sox. With a little luck, you can even catch that laptop! Your sudden athletic prowess is due to an automatic overdrive system called the *fight-or-flight response* that kicks in for survival purposes. When the emergency is over, your "rubber band" relaxes and you return to a resting state of balance and ease.

But what if the stressor doesn't go away? After all, life is much more complex than flying laptops with short trajectories. The fight-or-flight system evolved before chronic stresses like those of a company seeking a bailout in a struggling economy, families juggling mounting credit card debt, or losing your pension just as you're ready to retire. If you can't release tension, then stress becomes chronic and you become more prone to illness, depression, anger, and anxiety. And instead of enjoying life as the creative adventure that resilient people perceive it to be, you get sidelined and stuck.

One of the most famous scales for evaluating stress levels and correlating them with illness was designed in 1967 by two psychiatrists, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. Their scale measures stress in Life Change Units (LCU's). The most stressful change, the death of a spouse, rates 100 LCU's. Getting married rates a 50. After all, learning to pick up your dirty socks (or live with some one who doesn't), agreeing on a budget, or discovering that your beloved snores can be stressful life changes. Taking out a small loan or a mortgage was worth 17 LCU's in the mid-1960's. These days, when job loss and foreclosures are so high, it might garner even more points.

Holmes and Rahe gave the test to thousands of people and correlated their scores with health.<sup>2</sup> The higher the score, the more likely their subjects were to get sick. A score of more than 300 LCU's is associated with a high risk of illness, while scores between 150-300 correlate with a

moderate risk of illness. You can find a copy of the Holmes and Rahe stress scale for adults and youth on Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes\\_and\\_Rahe\\_stress\\_scale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holmes_and_Rahe_stress_scale)). The scale has been tested in both men and women, and in different cultures as well. Their pioneering research helped define the role of change in stress and set the scene for understanding resilience.

**What's My Number?** You can get a very simple read on your stress level by drawing a horizontal line 100 millimeters long on a piece of paper. Draw a happy face (relaxed and at ease) on the left end and a sad face (stressed and tense) on the right end. Then place a hatch mark wherever you think your stress level is. Measure the line from left to right. Are you a 20 a 30 a 75?

Repeat the reading each day at the same time (before meals, since eating is relaxing) and record it daily for a month. Does your number fall as you practice the exercises in the book? If not, consider getting professional help.

### **The Three Secrets of Resilience**

Ironically, the serious trauma that soldiers experience in battle has recently become a living laboratory for resilience. Dr. Steven Southwick, himself a veteran of the Vietnam War, is deputy director of the Clinical Neurosciences Division of the National Center for PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

He said, "We do know there are factors that make some people resilient. There are genetic components to it, but there's a huge learning component. People can train themselves to be more resilient."<sup>3</sup>

We do know there are factors that make some people resilient. There are genetic components to it, but there's a huge learning component. *People can train themselves to be more resilient.* –Steven Southwick, M.D.

Resilience, as you might expect, is big business for corporations. Numerous consulting companies teach businesses and their employees how to stress less and become more adaptable and creative in trying circumstances. Diane Coutu, a writer for the Harvard Business Review, summarized much of what they teach in an excellent article published in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

Coutu analyzed research data from studies that investigated resilience in diverse populations... at-risk children, Holocaust survivors, prisoners of war, businesses and their employees, people with life challenging illness, and survivors of abuse. She also interviewed some fascinating people who had lived through unsettling times and come out better for the challenge.

She interviewed Jim Becker, the president and CEO of a company called Adaptive Learning Systems that teaches resilience. Becker said, "More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and

who fails. That's true in the cancer ward, it's true in the Olympics, and it's true in the Boardroom."<sup>5</sup>

Coutu identified three traits of resilient thinking. As you read through them in the remainder of this chapter, consider these secrets a map for healthy thinking that can reduce your stress and help you discover your best future.

*“Resilience is a reflex, a way of facing and understanding the world, that is deeply etched into a person's mind and soul. Resilient people and companies face reality with staunchness, make meaning of hardship instead of crying out in despair, and improvise solutions from thin air. Others do not.” -Diane Coutu*

### ***Secret #1: A resolute acceptance of reality***

So there I was ready to go on Sonya Live and scared witless. It occurred to me that green rooms might not be named for the color of their walls, but for the color of their occupants. What to do in the face of this stressor? I suppose I could have hidden in the bathroom, but that would have been unseemly. It would also have killed off my fledgling media career. The simple fact was that I was a scheduled guest on a popular television show. I needed to rise to the occasion, whatever it took.

Resilient thinkers face difficult situations head on. Then they do whatever it takes to survive. How about you? Do you accept your situation realistically or are you more prone to denial, rationalization, or wishful thinking?

Resilient thinkers face difficult situations head on. Then they do whatever it takes to survive. For example, if your small business relies on supplying restaurants and people aren't eating out, you're in trouble. If you're a construction worker and no new buildings are going up the writing is on the wall. The faster you're able to see the truth and take a good, hard look at how you can modify your business to adjust to the situation the better you'll do.

Getting a job at McDonald's or bagging groceries may not be your idea of career heaven, but it still brings in cash that can make the difference between staying in your home or losing it. Taking a job like these when there's no other choice at hand shows the resolute acceptance of reality that characterizes the resilient mindset.

Rationalization (lots of people are behind on their mortgage, but the government will get us out of this soon), denial (things aren't so bad, I'm bound to get some orders soon), and wishful thinking (I'll just visualize myself living in a mansion and say some affirmations), are common coping strategies when things get tough. But putting your head in the sand won't put dinner on the table. You can only get through chaotic times if you have a clear, realistic picture of what's actually coming down. This is true both for businesses and for each of us personally.

Perhaps you've just been diagnosed with a serious illness. While it always pays to have hope, resilience requires that you look your diagnosis straight in the eye and make appropriate plans for treatment, managing financial responsibilities, updating your will, and getting the necessary support at every level. In other words, given the reality of whatever your situation is, what is needed to manage it?

It's time to bite the bullet. Facing reality can be emotionally trying in the short run, but lifesaving later on. Sit down with a trusted friend and tell them what the reality of your situation is, as best as you know it.

Diane Coutu told the following story in her article, *How Resilience Works*. When the World Trade Center was bombed in 1993, financial giant J.P. Morgan Stanley faced the reality that the highly symbolic building they occupied was a prime terrorist target. They responded by implementing escape drills, which they expected everyone to attend and take seriously. They also designated three safe locations elsewhere for employees to congregate where they could continue their business activities in case of disaster.

This heads-up attitude proved life-saving nine years later on 9/11 when two airplanes destroyed the iconic twin towers and killed nearly 3,000 people. Luck was also on J.P. Morgan's side since their 2700 employees were all in the south tower, which was the second to be struck. The first tower went down at 8:46 a.m. By 8:47 a.m. J.P. Morgan Stanley's employees were evacuating. Within 15 minutes the offices were almost empty. In spite of receiving an almost direct hit, they lost only seven employees, including the vice president of security, Rick Rescoria, who had designed the escape drills and stayed behind with a bullhorn, keeping the employees calm and getting them to safety. Rescoria was himself a resilient, highly decorated Viet Nam vet who had learned to put other people's needs in front of his own.

### ***Secret #2. A deep belief that life is meaningful***

Two weeks after 9/11 I facilitated a spiritual retreat just outside of New York City. It was an intensely emotional time for the whole country, but especially for two young Manhattan roommates who were attending the retreat together. Their balcony faced the World Trade Center, and they had witnessed the twin towers falling firsthand. Both of them were having flashbacks and nightmares, signs of PTSD. And both of them were trying to make meaning out of the shock and terror.

One of the young men had already turned to the work of Viktor Frankl, a resilient Austrian psychiatrist who survived four Nazi death camps and then wrote the classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was inspired by the statement of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "That which does not kill me makes me stronger." In spite of the unthinkable trauma and hardship he suffered during the Holocaust, Frankl became a happy man and an inspiration to millions of

people worldwide. The key to resilience, he believed, was to find positive meaning in traumatic experience.

When tempted to give up hope in the death camps, he found a reason to live by setting his sights on giving seminars on resilience to people after the war. He was determined to make positive use of the hard lessons he was learning. How would your life be different if this was the attitude with which you approached even the worst imaginable circumstances?

*“Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how.’ ... Know that everything in life has a purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences, all events are blessings given to us to learn from.” -Viktor Frankl*

The most deeply held values that give meaning to our lives are often spiritual in nature. Feeling an authentic connection to a larger intelligence, whether you relate to it as a loving, forgiving God or a universal energy of compassion encourages what’s best in us. When times get tough, the tough often pray whether they’re in prison camps, at the bedside of loved ones, or in the unemployment line. Faith is highly correlated with resilience, providing a true north that orients us when we’re lost in a sea of change or desperation. But the face of faith itself is changing. Despite the power of Evangelical Christians in the political arena, they represent only 7% of the American public.

According to a 2008 poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, ninety-two percent of Americans believe in God or some universal spirit, but the great majority (some 70%) believe that there are many paths to God. Other polls indicate that about a third of Americans consider themselves “spiritual eclectics,” finding inspiration in various traditions without subscribing to any one.

Being spiritual but not religious is a growing trend. Psychiatrist George Vaillant, director of the Study of Adult Development at Harvard Medical School in Boston, and one of the world’s leading experts on resilience, points out that many of the bestselling books in America over the past five years are based either on the spiritual search or “the rejection of the religious in a secular world.”<sup>6</sup>

The importance of finding a source of strength and guidance within, and nurturing it through practices like meditation applies to everyone—the person of deep religious conviction, the agnostic, and the atheist alike. When the mind calms down it’s easier to relate to the world around us—seeing the beauty in a flower or appreciating the nuances of a smile. These deep connections—which are sacred--invite positive emotions like awe, joy, gratitude, and compassion that banish stress and cultivate inner strength. Vaillant writes, “Spirituality is not about ideas, sacred texts and theology; rather, spirituality is all about emotions and social connection. Specific

religions, for all their limitations, are often the portal through which positive emotions are brought into conscious attention.”<sup>7</sup>

***Secret #3: An uncanny ability to improvise***

Resilient people are masters of innovation. Their fertile imaginations are expansive, and they attend to details that others might miss or consider irrelevant, using everything at their disposal to create the best outcome possible. Like a child who can use a kitchen pot as a drum, a doghouse, a hat, a boat, or a scoop for sand, resilient people use their imaginations to improvise solutions using whatever they can find.

The term for making do with whatever is at hand is the French word *bricolage*. One of my clients, whom I’ll call Tasha, is a true *bricoleur*. She lost her job as a draftsman at an architectural firm. True to her resilient nature, Tasha showed up the very next morning at a temporary labor pool, and was relieved to make \$10 an hour doing whatever work was available. In the course of a month she temped as a receptionist, filed records in a doctor’s office, and watered indoor plants for a landscape company.

The landscape job intrigued her even though she had very little responsibility at first. She was hired to schlep water and soak plants. But in just a few weeks Tasha was offering suggestions for where to move plants for better growth and more aesthetic harmony. She created new indoor landscapes out of existing materials in a way that was both practical and beautiful. The some spatial intelligence that served her as a draftsman was the segway to a new career. Within three months Tasha had been hired fulltime by the company, and was training to become an interior landscape designer.

To improvise is to create something new that arises organically out of available resources. Look around the room you’re in with all the curiosity you can muster. What could be moved around to create more efficiency, comfort, and beauty? Could something in another room be better used in this one?

Improvisation requires attentiveness and mindfulness, which is the ability to see your environment with unabashed curiosity. Concentration camp inmates who collected bits of string and wire wherever they found them were often the ones who survived. Fashioning a shoelace out of odds and ends could make the difference between freezing to death or living to see another day.

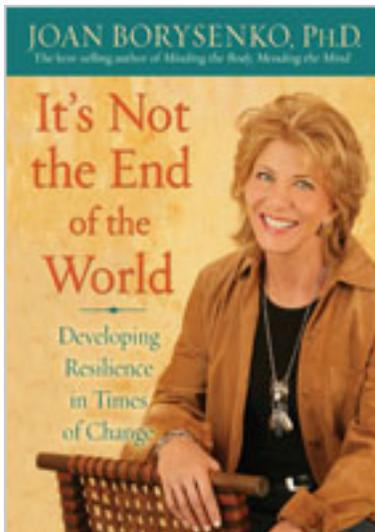
Living in poverty as a graduate student helped cultivate my own ability to improvise. That’s why challenge is a good thing. It’s an invitation to master new skills that aren’t needed in more comfortable circumstances. I supported my young son and student husband on a meager government stipend. When something broke, I had to fix it as my husband wasn’t handy and there was no spare cash to call the Maytag Man. Armed with a screwdriver, a few wrenches, a hammer, some wire, and the greatest invention of the civilized world...duct tape...I could have given Rube

Goldberg a run for his money.

Many organizations, of course, hope to recruit people with this talent. During World War II, the American government was recruiting intelligence operatives. Interviewees were asked to describe the waiting room. Those who were skilled at mindfulness, and therefore attentive to their environment, could describe it in phenomenal detail. They could remember things like the placement of doors and windows, the subject matter of pictures, and the color and type of furniture. Since every bit of information comes in handy when a situation calls for a creative response, the attentive were the ones who got the job.

In this chapter we've explored the three secrets of resilience; an eyes open acceptance of reality, a deep belief that life is meaningful, and the penchant for creative improvisation. To learn more about resilience, check out my book on the topic:

*It's not the End of the World: Developing Resilience in Times of Change, Hay House, Carlsbad 2009*



<sup>1</sup> Mickey Rourke, in response to a question by Jose G. Camil of Queretaro, Mexico in Time Magazine, Feb 9, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes T.H. and Rahe R.H., The Social Readjustment Rating Scale, *J Psychosom Res* **11** (2): 213–8, 1967 and Rahe R.H. and Arthur R.J., Life change and illness studies: past history and future directions, *J Human Stress* **4** (1): 3–15, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> *Facing Combat Without Stress? Researchers Examine Most Resilient Soldiers*, Lisa Chedekel, Hartford Courant Staff Writer, VA News Flash, 08-26-07, <http://www.vawatchdog.org/07/nf07/nfAUG07/nf082607-7.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Diane L. Coutu, How Resilience Works, The Harvard Business Review, May, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Diane L. Coutu, How Resilience Works, The Harvard Business Review, May, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Vaillant M.D., Positive Emotions, Spirituality and the Practice of Psychiatry, MSN Monographs, 6:1, pp 48-62, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> George E. Vaillant M.D., Positive Emotions, Spirituality and the Practice of Psychiatry, MSN Monographs, 6:1, pp 48-62, 2008

**Chapter Two** (note to the editor. I don't know how to make the endnotes start over at 1 since there are no breaks in the document)

That's the danger in times of change. The good news is that resilience isn't a genetic gift for the lucky few. It's an easily understood skill that anyone can practice and master. Resilient people face reality head on, take action, find deeper meaning in life, laugh often, and are masters of improvisation. A new kind of natural selection is already having its way with us. Hopeful, stress-hardy people will rule the world. This book by Joan Borysenko is the key you need to step into a bold new future that works for us all. Publisher: Hay House Inc ISBN: 9781401926328 Number of pages: 176 Weight: 251 g Dimensions: 186 x 136 x 17 mm. You may also be interested in Added to basket. The Art of Resilience. Ross Edgley. £20.00 £16.99. Joan Z. Borysenko. The world is in crisis, but you don't have to be. We all know resilient people who bounce back from hardship and create their best lives. That's the promise of change. Other people stress out and melt down, losing hope and health. That's the danger in times of change. The good news is that resilience isn't a genetic gift for the lucky few. It's an easily understood skill that anyone can practice and master. Resilient people face reality head on, take action, find deeper meaning in life, laugh often, and are masters of improvisation. A new kind of nat