

# Resilience; a skill we can all learn

By Sarah Berry



We can learn the skills to keep going and overcome challenge. Photo: Getty Images

What distinguishes those who break from those who overcome adversity?

There have been three times in my life when I have gone head to head with my darkest self and didn't think I would come out on top.

The first time was as a 12-year-old who couldn't cope with, nor control, certain external circumstances. I withdrew and controlled what I could. I stopped eating, stopped talking and went from running nationals to not walking.

There was a period when I lay in a hospital bed waiting, hoping to fade into oblivion so I didn't have to feel any more. It was impossible to imagine surviving, let alone finishing school, going to university, falling in love, having a life beyond that ever-shrinking world.

Several years later, when I was walking the road to "recovery", but was still suffocating inside, I felt the same desperate sense of being broken beyond repair.

The last time was during one of life's perfect storms: a job loss, a reluctant abortion, a pet kitten that was accidentally squashed by a car and a sudden relationship split, which left me out of home and broken-hearted. It was a smack-down of the most visceral kind and, in truth, it took years to crawl out from it and feel strong enough to walk. But, I did.

Being broken open revealed resilience to me; that it is possible to get up again and not only feel better, but to be better than before, because with each painful shedding of skin there was growth and renewal and, through this, the realisation not of weakness, but of strength.

Resilience comes from the Latin for "to jump again".

George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist from Columbia University, has spent more than two decades trying to understand what makes people "jump again" instead of roll over.

It's an important question, because we all face moments in life where we take hits and not everyone jumps again when they fall down.

In fact, in a 1989 study, two-thirds of at-risk children (due to family problems, poverty or exposure to stress in some other form) "developed serious learning or behaviour problems by the age of 10, or had delinquency records, mental health problems, or teen-age pregnancies by the age of 18".

The others were "competent, confident, and caring young adults".

What set them apart?

There were several factors – including the luck of having a positive guiding influence in their lives – but, the primary factor distinguishing the kids who "jumped again" was that they believed they had control over their circumstances; they believed they could change their circumstances.

Bonanno has come to a similar conclusion.

In a new interview with New Yorker magazine, he says our perception is key: whether or not we see tough times as our chance to change and grow.

"Events are not traumatic until we experience them as traumatic," Bonanno told New Yorker. "To call something a 'traumatic event' belies that fact."

Rather, he says it's a "potentially traumatic event", depending on our perspective.

For instance, in 2015, Bonanno published a study on people grieving the loss of a loved one.

He found that those who "recovered" tended to use their grief to strengthen their connection with those around them – reaching out, connecting more – and even to change their mindset – having greater appreciation for life or health, for example.

Even amid deep sadness, it is an essentially positive response to a potentially traumatic event.

"Exposure to potentially traumatic events does not predict later functioning," he says. "It's only predictive if there's a negative response."

The positive news is that these responses can be learnt.

"We can make ourselves more or less vulnerable by how we think about things," Bonanno says.

Realising we all take hits in life and that it isn't our fault and doesn't mean there's something wrong with us is the first step. Knowing that we have the power to change our circumstances is the second quality that helps us to grow from challenge, according to resilience researchers.

Sometimes, to learn this skill, we have to crawl a while before we walk, but that doesn't mean we won't get there.

As the incredibly resilient Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Source: <http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/life/resilience-a-skill-we-can-all-learn-20160221-gmzryd.html#ixzz40qVz2UAs>