How to Deal with Adversity

By Sharon Livingston, Ph.D
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How to Deal with Adversity

Originally trained as a psychotherapist, Dr. Sharon Livingston has helped literally thousands of people. Along with her husband Glenn, she’s sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. And more than $30,000,000 in marketing consulting to a long list of Fortune 500 companies! Sharon’s work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, AdWeek, The Wall Street Journal, and many more!

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How to Deal With and Overcome Adversity

As much as we hate to think about it, adversity is a part of life! Everyone will experience challenges and difficulties throughout their lives, but when you learn how to deal with and overcome adversity, it can make an even greater, more positive impact!

What is Adversity?

The definition of adversity is: a difficult situation or condition: misfortune or tragedy. It can be something as small as locking your keys in the car or having an argument with your partner but it can also be a much larger obstacle like losing a job, breaking up with a significant other, being diagnosed with an illness or losing a loved one.

When you think about it, adversity could be described as every “problem” you have in life. Adversity can take on many different forms, but the overall feelings and reactions it awakens in all of us are similar.

Some examples of these feelings are:

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Chaos
- Anger
- Disbelief
- Depression
- Loss of control

Research shows that people who have experienced good outcomes in response to challenge are more likely to feel confident in their capabilities. Their sense of success and self-efficacy* grows as they continue to see results for their efforts. They also tend to be resilient in the face of adversity. Because they have faith in themselves, a failed attempt just motivates them to try again. It’s an intriguing test rather than an insurmountable barrier. They are the ones who tend to ascribe the to the old adage “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Because of their positive self concept they often do succeed and are the types of people who apply their self belief to many areas over their lifetime with good results. According to Wikipedia:

* Self-efficacy is the extent or strength of one’s belief in one’s own ability to complete tasks and reach goals

This can be seen as the ability to persist and a person’s ability to succeed with a task. As an example, self-efficacy directly relates to how long someone will stick to a workout regimen or a diet. High and low self-efficacy determine whether or not someone will choose to take on a challenging task or write it off as impossible.

Self-efficacy affects every area of human endeavor. By determining the beliefs a person holds regarding his or her power to affect situations, it strongly influences both the power a person actually has to face challenges competently and the choices a person is most likely to make. These effects are particularly apparent, and compelling, with regard to behaviors affecting health.

On the other hand, people who develop an attitude of self doubt tend to flounder. As kids, these people lacked encouragement in the face of difficulties. They often give up after very few unsuccessful trials, experiencing themselves
as inept losers. They readily accept defeat. The good news is that whatever your prior experiences, you can strengthen yourself to prevail in the face of adversity, even if you tend to be a self-doubting Thomas!

**Tips on Ways to Deal with Adversity**

1. **Be kind to yourself**

   Dealing with adversity brings up normal responses to loss that we all experience in one form or another. The greater the adversity, the greater the sense of loss and the more the 5 stages of grief are present – Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, but finally, Acceptance.

   So take a deep breath, accept that it was something difficult for you, and be there with yourself, for yourself like you would be for your best friend – listening, understanding, compassionate and supportive and then encouraging them to come out and be with you in the world.

   “Yeah, that seems like it must have been awful. Tell me all about it. Sounds sooo sad/upsetting/infuriating/depressing. So sorry. How can I help? Can I get you a warm cup of tea while we thrash it out?”

2. **Remember that Adversity is just a part of Life**

   One of the first reactions to an unexpected and unpleasant event is denial. There you were, on your merry way when BAM! You’re stopped in your tracks.

   Reframe your feelings about the situation. In most cases, the road to success is a winding one, paved with pits and boulders and flying objects. It’s like a video game that challenges us to fine tune our skills. These games, though exaggerated, reflect life with the types of tests that throw us off temporarily but eventually sharpen our saws.

   Catch your breath and then start strategizing. Ask yourself, what are all the things I could do to move on? What happened? How did I respond? What worked well? What could have been better? What might I do in the future?

   You might actually find yourself getting excited about the possibilities.

3. **Look to your Friends and Family for Support**

   Stay social by spending time with friends and family. Call them on the phone. Invite someone to coffee, lunch or dinner. Get out rather than isolating or hibernating.

   Having a strong support system will help you to conquer obstacles that comes your way. You may even find that one or more of them have dealt with similar difficulties and may have some “words of wisdom ” to help get you through it. Everyone has their own solutions. It will be great food for thought and action.

4. **Practice Gratitude**

   Gratitude is known to enhance health and feelings of well being. Research shows that those who are thankful experience better physical health and mood than those who focus on annoyances, problems and complaints.
Try this for a better night’s sleep. Keep a notebook by your bed and jot down 10 things you’re grateful for each night. They can be as small as you want, e.g.,

I’m grateful for the soft pillow under my head

I’m grateful for the sound of my little dog breathing so calmly in his kennel next to me

I’m grateful for cool air I breathe . . .

5. **Take care of yourself**

Just because you’re trying to deal with obstacles and difficult situations in your life, doesn’t mean your health and well-being should suffer.

Make sure you get rest. Sufficient sleep is probably the most important component to healing physically and mentally.

Move. Go for a walk, go to the gym, jump up and down, dance. We are organisms that are meant to move our bodies for both physical and mental health.

Heavy sugars and starches tend to drag us down, make us feel bloated, lethargic, depressed, ornery and anxious, particularly when we’re feeling stressed. So, eat healthier than usual making sure you drink lots of water and eat fresh veggies and fruits.

6. **Be Optimistic - Look for/Remember the Positives**

Having a positive mind-set can help you grow and develop skills and techniques to work towards your goals. Resilient people are good at tapping into the ratio of good to not so good. Research has shown that a three to one ratio of positive to negative experiences boosts happiness and helps people bounce back faster and stronger.

Even though this event may seriously suck the wind out of your sails, refocus on and appreciate little joys and victories. Avoid splitting existence into all dark and gloomy versus a beautiful bright fairy land.

Dark adds texture and form and depth to light. The world is in full color with many subtle shades. Often the darkness helps the beautiful colors stand out so you can appreciate them more.

Remembering and enjoying the other positives in your life is reparative and affirming. This includes the little things that are easy and cost little that make your “heart sing.”

Some of mine for example:

- seeing a beautiful sunrise or sunset,
- snuggling with my honey,
- playing with my pup
- listening to a fun story
- dancing “as though no one was watching”
- sipping a soothing cup of chai tea
- hiking in the woods
- going to a meditation class
- laughing at life’s lunacies
7. **Believe in Yourself**

Believing in yourself and having the confidence in knowing that you have the ability to achieve great things will get you far in life. If you don’t believe in yourself, it’s much harder to keep yourself going to achieve your goals.

Consider this re-parenting exercise. Close your eyes and relax. Imagine you are taking a walk down a country road on a beautiful quiet day. You see a young child sitting underneath a tree. As you get closer, you realize it’s yourself as a 5 year old.

What an adorable kid!! Whether the little person you see seems happy, sad, annoyed, scared, this child is an adorable little person. This is your opportunity to tell the little one something you always wanted to hear. Think about what that might be for a moment and then gently whisper it into this child’s ear . . .

Some examples

- I love you just the way you are
- You are beautiful
- You are strong and capable
- You are smart and creative
- You can do it
- You are a powerhouse
- You radiate beauty, charm and grace
- Your wonderful life is just beginning
- You make an important difference in the lives you touch

**Wrap Up:**

Resilience is not necessarily a quality that you are either born with your not. Nor is there any one “right” way to get from here to there.

The willingness to get up once you have fallen and try again, is often the difference between success and defeat.

There was an old Frank Sinatra song called, High Hopes. Did you ever hear it?

*Once there was a little old ant.*  
*Thought he’d move a rubber tree plant.*  
*Anyone knows an ant can’t, move a rubber tree plant.*  
*But he’s got High Hopes. He’s got High Hopes.*  
*He’s got high apple pie in the sky hopes!*  
*So any time you’re feeling low, stead of letting go, just remember that ant!*  
*Oops there goes another rubber tree plant!*  
*Oops there goes another problem kerplunk!*  

To Your Success!

Sharon ☺

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(Please See the Next Page for a Summary of Gentle Reminders You Can Print Out and Keep Near Bye)
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Move around to keep your blood flowing. Exercise, dance.
Eat healthier than usual making sure you drink lots of water and eat fresh veggies and fruits.

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Speak lovingly to yourself and your inner child

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