


How do you build Personal Resilience during challenging times? – Part 2 – Learned Optimism

In **Part 1** of “How to Build Personal Resilience during challenging times - Values”, I began by describing a good friend of mine, **Hugh Culver**, (Motivational Speaker, author, and founder of [Marathon Communications](#)). Hugh is one of those rare individuals who, no matter what is going on, always seems resourceful, motivated, and happy. He faces the same challenges we all do, whether it’s competing demands, faltering economies, or personal challenges, yet somehow he remains *resilient*. What do I mean by resilient?



What is Personal Resilience

Resilience is the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances.
KA Gordon (1995)

And I would add.....
'enjoy the process along the way'.

What I like about this definition is that we’re not talking about squeaking through or just surviving, but **thriving**.

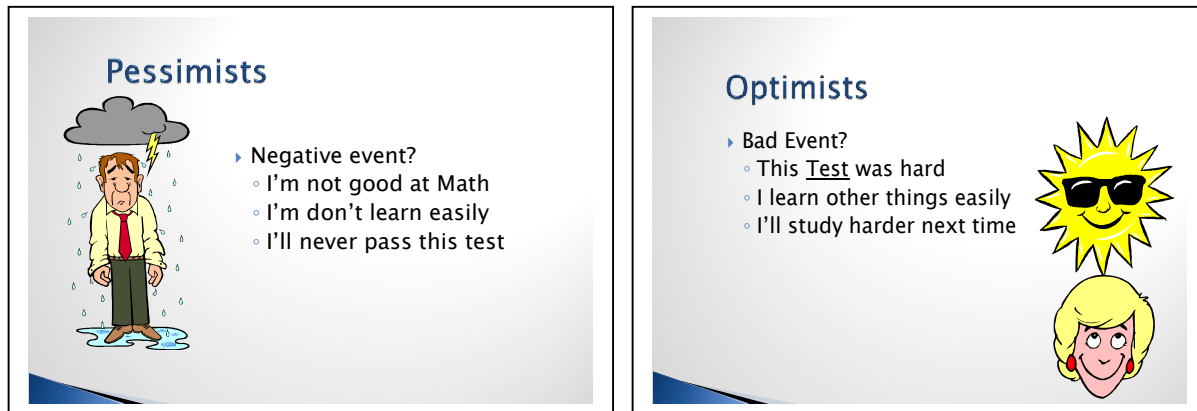
Well, as Anthony Robbins (World Renowned motivational speaker, success coach, and author of *Awaken the Giant Within* (1991) says, ‘success leaves clues’. So let’s look at another habit or ‘practice’ these naturally resilient people do that helps them achieve success in being resilient. **Practice Optimism**.

2/ Practice Optimism – That’s right. There are specific skills you can practice that will help you develop your sense of optimism. Optimism is hopefulness, confidence. Many studies show that to the degree we are optimistic or hopeful about a certain situation, we are more able to identify possible solutions and more likely to **take action**. In his book **Learned Optimism** (1990), **Dr. Martin Seligman** shares his findings from his extensive research in the field of pessimism and optimism. He coined the term *Learned Helplessness* after his experiments with dogs and operant conditioning revealed that previously healthy and resourceful dogs could ‘learn’ to become ‘helpless’ when faced with obstacles that were consistently impossible to overcome. He turned his research toward human behavior to determine whether people were born pessimistic or optimistic, or whether they learned those outlooks through experience. 2 of his findings are most fascinating to me (and relevant to resilience)

1/ Some people do seem to have natural ‘explanatory styles’ that are more pessimistic or optimistic.

2/ You can **learn** to be more **optimistic**.

Here is an example: Let's say that 2 different people take the same Math test in school. Both receive a fail. A person who has a more pessimistic explanatory style, might say that 'they' are not good at Math, they don't learn anything easily, and they'll probably never pass this class. The person with the more optimistic explanatory style would likely say "that test was hard, I've learned lots of new things in the past, next time I'll study harder".



Want to learn how to be even **more Optimistic? Here is what to do:**

1/ Be Aware of your Self Talk – Notice what you say to yourself day to day. For instance, when you have forgotten where your car keys are – do you say 'how could I be so stupid?' or if your running late for dinner, do you sometimes think 'why am I always late?'

2/ Stop negative self talk – As you notice it, stop the negative self talk, or 'distract' yourself.

3/ Challenge negative talk – 'I'm not stupid, I've simply misplaced my keys'. Or 'I am a few minutes late tonight but I'm not 'always' late.

4/ Identify past successes – 'I remembered all my appointments this week, my assistants birthday, and the authors of every leadership book I've read'. Or, 'I've consistently arrived at work 30 minutes early for years and I've been on time for every board meeting this year'.

5/ Create a strategy for success – **a/** focus on what you want. Instead of thinking 'why am I so forgetful?' think, 'how can I remember my keys easily?' or, 'what do I need to do to be on time?'. **b/** create a strategy for success – 'From now on, I'll hang my keys at the front door, as soon as I walk in the house'. Or 'from now on I'll print off MapQuest directions the night before, and leave 15 minutes early'.

6/ Celebrate Success – notice what is working and celebrate – success (even a small one) creates momentum.

I've used relatively light examples here, but try these steps with any challenge you may be facing right now, whether finding work, staying fit, or creating more balance. With an optimistic outlook, you'll see more possibilities, be more resourceful, and more willing to move to action.

Want to learn more about building personal resilience for yourself? Or in your organization?

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