

## The Road to the Good Life: How to Feel Better About Your Past

In our last issue of *Illuminations*, we focused on ways to increase our happiness in the present by changing how we experience it: by savoring and practicing mindfulness, and by utilizing our signature strengths to increase our gratification and satisfaction. While our feelings about our present, future, and past are related, they are not necessarily linked. For example, it is possible to have many pleasures in the present, but be bitter about the past. Today we will focus on overcoming past adversity.

The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, abuse, and neglect: these are all examples of challenging life experiences. Many people react to such circumstances with a flood of strong emotions and a sense of uncertainty. Yet over time, people generally adapt well. What enables us to do so? The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, threats, relationship problems, and other stressors, is called **resilience**. Resilience is not a trait that people have or don't have: it involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed by anyone.

Factors involved in resilience include:

- supportive relationships
- the capacity to make realistic plans and carry them out
- a positive view of oneself and confidence in one's strengths and abilities
- skills in communication and problem solving
- the capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses

The strategies that people use to build resilience vary from person to person and culture to culture. The following includes some of the strategies that people have found helpful.

While you can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, **you can change how you interpret and respond to these events**. Emotions about the past can range from contentment, pride and satisfaction to shame, bitterness and vengeful anger. Our emotions are highly related to our thoughts and interpretations about the past. For example, if a person were to hear their ex's name, and the first thing they remember is betrayal – they are likely to still feel angry, even if it is many years later. Or, when a person is depressed, it is much easier to recall sad rather than happy memories of the past.

You can change your feelings by noticing the negative statements you tell yourself and by learning to counter and replace these negative statements with positive, self-supportive statements that reinforce your ability to cope.

**Nurturing a positive view of yourself is important.** There are two fallacies typically encountered when people have difficulty with this idea of self-acceptance. One is the belief that if we accept who and what we are, we must approve of everything about ourselves. The other is the belief that if we accept who and what we are, we are indifferent to change or improvement. In fact, it is the opposite: Acceptance of what *is*, is the precondition for change. Denial of what is, leaves us stuck.

Suppose you have done something that you regret, or of which you are ashamed, and for which you reproach yourself. You would not want to deny reality or argue that what is wrong is really right. Instead, look at the context in which the action

was taken. **It helps to understand why something that is wrong or inappropriate felt desirable or appropriate or even necessary at the time.** Learn to make caring responses to yourself.

**Keep things in perspective.** Recognize that past crises are not insurmountable problems and accept that change is a part of living. Maintain a hopeful outlook. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear, or detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away. It helps to take decisive action and move toward your goals. Do something regularly – even if it seems like a small accomplishment – that enables you to move forward.

Insufficient appreciation of the good events in our past and overemphasis on the bad ones can also undermine our satisfaction with our past. **Two ways of focusing these feelings about the past in a more positive direction include gratitude and forgiveness.** Gratitude amplifies the savoring and appreciation of the good events gone by. The classic recommendation is to write down five things each day in your life that you are grateful or thankful for about that day. Many people have found this to make a profound difference. Forgiveness lessens the power of bad events to embitter. Forgiveness is a long, complicated journey and it is an individual decision about whether or not it feels appropriate to do so. Research studies indicate that forgiveness has been associated with less anger, less stress, better-reported health and more optimism.

**Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, a greater sense of personal strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and a heightened appreciation for life.

**Take care of yourself.** Pay attention to your needs and feelings. Exercise regularly. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Many research studies show that the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships. Make connections with others. Accept help and support from those who care about you. Assist others in their time of need. Being active in groups can also help reclaim hope.

As you can see, resilience involves maintaining flexibility and balance:

- Letting yourself experience strong emotion and also realizing when you may need to avoid experiencing them at times in order to continue functioning;
- Stepping forward and taking action to deal with your problems and also stepping back to rest and reenergize yourself;
- Spending time with loved ones to gain support and encouragement and also nurturing yourself;
- Relying on others and also relying on yourself.

If you feel “stuck” or have difficulty making progress in your journey to overcome past adversity, consider seeing a therapist.

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