



## Resilience can get you through life's trials

Survivors of tough times know how to cope — and you can learn, too

By Denise Foley

**Prevention**

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Angela Madsen was a military police officer in the U.S. Marine Corps when she injured her back so severely that she had to take an early discharge. She needed surgery, and when she awoke from anesthesia, she learned that her spinal column had been pierced and she was partially paralyzed from the waist down. She was told that she wouldn't walk again for a year or two, and maybe never. "I did exactly what many people do after something like that. I went through a period of feeling hopeless," says the 47-year-old single mother and grandmother from Long Beach, CA.

And at first, her situation did seem hopeless. She lost her job as a mechanical engineer. She began to gain weight, ballooning to more than 300 pounds. Then came a turning point. A remark by a doctor, who called her physical condition "a waste of a human life," flipped a switch. She vowed she would do whatever it took to get her life back.

Today, 14 years later, Madsen is training to be the first woman with a disability to row across the Atlantic. It will cap more than a decade of awards for rowing, swimming, surfing, basketball, shot put, javelin, weight lifting, even billiards — that have made her a Paralympian hopeful for Beijing 2008.

Madsen is what researchers call "resilient" — someone who is able to rebound from whatever difficulty life brings. She is one of those people who, like Christopher Reeve, make us wonder how we would fare if our own mettle were tested. Would we [bounce back](#) or be crushed by the pressure?

"From birth, some people do have a greater capacity to be resilient in the face of adversity," says Robert Brooks, PhD, an assistant clinical professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of "The Power of Resilience." "But biology is not destiny. That's where life experience comes in." Indeed, a growing body of research on those who've survived some of life's toughest trials — rape, a life-threatening illness, a child's death — reveals a handful of traits resilient people share and other people can develop.

### **They take control of their lives**

As part of her recovery, Madsen returned to the one thing that empowered her in the past: sports. She got involved in a women's wheelchair basketball league and taught herself to surf on her knees.

Experts say she tapped into one of the most important traits resilient people share: They don't see themselves as victims whose fate is in the hands of others. "It's easy to blame other people for your problems and wait until they fix them," says psychiatrist Steven Wolin, MD, coauthor with Sybil Wolin, PhD, of "The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity." "But then you never get to rise to the occasion and witness your own strength. If you think of yourself as a problem solver, life goes very differently."

In a 12-year study tracing the breakup of the former Illinois Bell Telephone Company, researchers found that those employees who thrived during the notorious upheaval had three characteristics in common: They saw problems as challenges, were committed to facing them head-on, and looked to influence their own outcomes. Though Bell experienced massive layoffs (nearly half of its 26,000 employees) and most of the remaining workforce was traumatized, the resilient employees had fewer stress-related illnesses than those who felt helpless.

What you can do: Identify your strengths. Recall those moments when you triumphed over adversity and give yourself credit. Resilient people not only learn from hard times but also acknowledge their own fortitude. In his work with children and adults who grew up in dysfunctional families, Wolin found that those who did better in life have "survivor's pride."

"Resilient people focus on what they can influence and don't spend time on things they can't," says Brooks. "Once you develop that sense of personal control, you begin to realize that you are the author of your own life."

### **They forge connections**

As a child, Ned Hallowell, MD, faced some tough odds. "I had a bipolar father, an alcoholic and abusive

stepfather, an alcoholic mother, and two learning disabilities — ADD and dyslexia," he says. Although his father was a gifted teacher and his mother devoted to her son, their troubles deeply affected him. "People with that profile often end up in jail or a mental hospital, at best eking out a marginal existence."

When Hallowell was 10, his mother sent him to boarding school. "I didn't have a sign around my neck that said troubled child, help me. But I attached myself to several teachers who took me under their wing," he explains. "They saved my life." Today he's a prominent psychiatrist, happily married father of three, and the author of a dozen books, several on the value of what he calls "human moments" — our meaningful connections to other people.

Studies of people who don't have a strong family support system find that the most resilient, like Hallowell, seek aid from others. "In research on abused children, those who were resilient as adults had at least one person who stood by them," says Brooks. Some researchers speculate that developing connections to others may be our most important emotional survival skill. Studies have shown that people who had many relationships — with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, even within church and community groups — actually lived longer than those who had the fewest.

What you can do: Make time for what matters. A Duke University study last year reported that the number of Americans who say they have no one to talk to about important subjects has nearly tripled since 1985. "You need to [find time for what you value](#) — family and friends, your pet, your garden, spirituality," says Hallowell. "People and hobbies will sustain you in the long run."

### **They allow pain to spur growth**

In 1983, at the peak of her career as a nature photographer, Linda Joy Montgomery learned she was going blind, the result of nerve damage caused by type 1 diabetes. She was terrified. "Photography wasn't just a job, it was my mission," says Montgomery, 54, of Black Mountain, NC. "I didn't know how I was going to function." But as she listened to her doctor's crushing diagnosis, she heard a voice from the inside. "It said, 'This is not the end, this is the beginning,' " she recalls. "Although I still had doubts and fears, I believed this was happening for a reason."

Though she could no longer express herself through her camera and photographs, she began writing poetry. In 1989, she published a book called *Silent Strength* that combined her nature photographs with her inspirational verse. She also found a new calling as a motivational speaker and created the True Vision Institute, teaching elementary students how to tap into their intuition and imagination.

Montgomery's ability to grow and find meaning in her misfortune is no aberration. Studies of victims of rape and incest, life-threatening illness, natural disasters, and combat, as well as Holocaust survivors and parents of chronically ill children, show that resilient people find the proverbial silver lining by reinventing themselves. Some gain a new appreciation for life; others, a renewed closeness to the people they love. "After overcoming a challenge, you develop a deep self-confidence and sense of optimism: 'I've been here, done that, and I'll survive,'" says Al Siebert, PhD, author of "The Resiliency Advantage," who has interviewed hundreds of such survivors.

What you can do: Accentuate the positive. Cultivate your childlike curiosity, grab every opportunity to laugh, spend time with friends. When trouble strikes, these will be your best resources. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill researcher Barbara Fredrickson, PhD, and others have found that during bad times, feeling positive — making plans for the future, expressing love and gratitude — helps people bounce back more quickly. "You need to find ways to adjust to fluctuating circumstances," says Siebert.

### **They insist on changing the world**

Ken Druck, PhD, an organizational psychologist and high-profile executive coach in San Diego, has taught resilience skills to top execs at companies such as Microsoft, IBM, and Pfizer. But in 1996, Druck experienced every parent's worst nightmare: His 21-year-old daughter, Jenna, was killed in a bus accident while studying abroad in India. That's when he learned that all the resilience in the world couldn't prepare him for the death of a child.

"After my daughter died, I wanted to die," says Druck. "While at no point was I suicidal, I, like many bereaved parents, had lost my sense of purpose. All the goodness had gone from my life."

Yet before the year was out, Druck, still reeling, had set the wheels in motion for his new life. To honor his daughter, who was San Diego's Young Woman Entrepreneur at age 9, he established the Jenna Druck Foundation. Its Young Women's Leadership Program provides leadership training for thousands of girls each year. A second program, Families Helping Families, offers free support services to bereaved families, individuals, and communities after the death of a child. Druck and his staff were on the scene following the Columbine High School shootings, at Ground Zero after the September 11 attacks, and in

New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

"It helped me heal," says Druck. "When you lose someone, love endures. But it hurts to not be able to express that love in the way that we're all accustomed to. Starting a foundation and doing good things every day in my daughter's name was another way for me to say 'I love you.'"

What you can do: Always give before you take: Helping others may be part of a human self-righting mechanism. In a study of rescue workers who dug through the rubble after the Oklahoma City bombing, most, though understandably distressed, had few or no symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder afterward. More than a third told researchers that even though their job involved the removal of human remains, it still gave them a sense of "relief and closure." "I once heard that in German concentration camps, there were a few men who always gave away their last morsel of food to other people," says Brooks. "That illustrates that you have the freedom to choose your attitude in any given set of circumstances, to control the only thing you can control in life — you."

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