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On Road to Recovery, Past Adversity Provides a Map

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

Whatever else it holds, this new year is sure to produce a healthy serving of redemption stories, against-the-odds tales of people who bounced back from the layoffs, foreclosures and other wreckage of 2010. They landed better jobs. They started successful companies. They found time to write a book, to study animal husbandry, to learn a new trade: to generate just the sort of commentary about perseverance, self-respect and character that can tempt anyone who's still struggling to throw things at the TV.

Character is a fine thing to admire, all right — once the storm has passed and the rigging is repaired.

But when people are truly sinking, because of job loss, illness, debt or some combination of ills, they have no idea what mix of character, connections and dumb luck will be enough to pull through. To use the [psychologists'](#) term, they don't know how "resilient" they are, or how much resilience even matters.

Do I have the right stuff? Or is this sinkhole simply too deep?

"As with so many of life's experiences, humans are simply not very good at predicting how they'll behave when hit by a real adversity," said Laura King, a psychologist at the [University of Missouri](#).

Researchers aren't so good at it, either. It is clear that with time, most people can and do psychologically recover from even devastating losses, like the death of a spouse; but reactions to the same blow vary widely, and no one can reliably predict who will move on quickly and who will lapse into longer-term despair.

The role of genes is likewise uncertain. In a paper published online Monday in The Archives of General Psychiatry, researchers at the [University of Michigan](#) who analyzed more than 50 studies concluded that variations in a single gene determine people's susceptibility to

depression following stressful events. But an earlier analysis, of fewer but similar studies, concluded that the evidence was not convincing.

New research suggests that resilience may have at least as much to do with how often people have faced adversity in past as it does with who they are — their personality, their genes, for example — or what they're facing now. That is, the number of life blows a person has taken may affect his or her mental toughness more than any other factor.

“Frequency makes a difference: that is the message,” said Roxane Cohen Silver, a psychologist at the [University of California, Irvine](#). “Each negative event a person faces leads to an attempt to cope, which forces people to learn about their own capabilities, about their support networks — to learn who their real friends are. That kind of learning, we think, is extremely valuable for subsequent coping,” up to a point.

[In a study](#) appearing in the current issue of *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Dr. Cohen Silver, E. Alison Holman, also of the University of California, Irvine, and Mark D. Seery, of the [State University at Buffalo](#), followed nearly 2,000 adults for several years, monitoring their mental well-being with online surveys. The participants, a diverse cross section of Americans between the ages of 18 and 101, listed all of the upsetting life events they had experienced before entering the study and any new ones that hit along the way. These included divorce, the death of a friend or parent, a serious illness, and being in a natural disaster.

Or, none of the above: A subset of the participants, 194, reported that they had experienced not one of the fairly comprehensive list of 37 events on the survey. “We wondered: Who are these people who have managed to go through life with nothing bad happening to them?” Dr. Cohen Silver said. “Are they hyper-conscientious? Socially isolated? Just young? Or otherwise unique?”

They weren't, the researchers found. Stranger still, they were not the most satisfied with their lives. Their sense of well-being was about the same, on average, as people who had suffered up to a dozen memorable blows.

It was those in the middle, those reporting two to six stressful events, who scored highest on several measures of well-being, and who showed the most resilience in response to recent hits.

In short, the findings suggest that mental toughness is something like the physical strength: It cannot develop without exercise, and it breaks down when overworked. Some people in the study reported having had more than a dozen stressful events, and it showed.

“These people were truly suffering,” Dr. Cohen Silver said, “and we do not minimize in any way the pain of such events when you’re going through them. But it does appear that if you’ve had several such experiences but not too many, you learn something.”

Other researchers who looked at the study were more cautious. George Bonanno, a psychologist at [Columbia University](#), said that the results may partly reflect a trick of [memory](#). In particular, “people who are more distressed will tend to recall more stressful life events,” Dr. Bonanno, the author of the book “The Other Side of Sadness,” said by e-mail. That by itself could explain the correlation between high numbers of lifetime crises and low current mood, he said.

It does not as easily explain the correlations at the lower end, Dr. Seery said. “The people in the study who recalled zero or one negative events were worse off than those with some adverse events,” he said. “So they were willing to admit to not doing so well, yet did not recall stressful life events.”

Experience may provide more than a sense of what to expect and who one’s real friends are. [In a recent study](#) in the journal *Emotion*, researchers at the University of Denver and the University of Basel in Switzerland tested the ability of 78 women to reduce the amount of sadness they felt after watching an upsetting film clip, using a technique called reappraisal. Reappraisal comes naturally to many people and is a way of taking the sting out of a situation by reframing how it’s understood: “I wasn’t afraid to act, I was uncertain; I didn’t have all the information.” The study found that the women who were adept at this sort of self-therapy were less susceptible to depressive symptoms after significant crises in their own lives.

It may be that experience with a few threatening or upsetting events refines these types of psychological skills, in a person’s own thinking through of the problem or in discussion with friends.

Either way, the lifetime resilience study suggests that the pain, the self-doubt, the [disorientation](#) and the anger that swarm the consciousness in the wake of a job loss, a foreclosure or a divorce can have some upside, even though it’s not remotely visible at the time.

“Perhaps the one most fundamental thing you learn in living through an experience like this is that you can come out the other end of almost anything,” Dr. King said. “You say, ‘Well, it may have crushed me, but I survived.’ ”

