Building Resilience

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Building Resilience

by Martin E.P. Seligman

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Listen to an interview with Martin Seligman.

14:06

Douglas and Walter, two University of Pennsylvania MBA graduates, were laid off by their Wall Street companies 18 months ago. Both went into a tailspin: They were sad, listless, indecisive, and anxious about the future. For Douglas, the mood was transient. After two weeks he told himself, "It's not you; it's the economy going through a bad patch. I'm good at what I do, and there will be a market for my skills." He updated his résumé and sent it to a dozen New York firms, all of which rejected him. He then tried six companies in his Ohio hometown and eventually landed a position. Walter, by contrast, spiraled into hopelessness: "I got fired because I can't perform under pressure," he thought. "I'm not cut out for finance. The economy will take years to recover." Even as the market improved, he didn't look for another job; he ended up moving back in with his parents.

Douglas and Walter (actually composites based on interviewees) stand at opposite ends of the continuum of reactions to failure. The Douglases of the world bounce back after a brief period of malaise; within a year they've grown because of the experience. The Walters go from sadness to depression to a paralyzing fear of the future. Yet failure is a nearly inevitable part of work; and along with dashed romance, it is one of life's most common traumas. People like Walter are almost certain to find their careers stymied, and companies full of such employees are doomed in hard times. It is people like Douglas who rise to the top, and whom organizations must recruit and retain in order to succeed. But how can you tell who is a Walter and who is a Douglas? And can Walters become Douglases? Can resilience be measured and taught?

Thirty years of scientific research has put the answers to these questions within our reach. We have learned not only how to distinguish those who will grow after failure from those who will collapse, but also how to build the skills of people in the latter category. I have worked with colleagues from around the world to develop a program for teaching resilience. It is now being tested in an organization of 1.1 million people where trauma is more common and more severe than in any corporate setting: the U.S. Army. Its members may struggle with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but thousands of them also experience post-traumatic growth. Our goal is to employ resilience training to reduce the number of those who struggle and increase the number of those who grow. We believe that businesspeople can draw lessons from this approach, particularly in times of failure and stagnation. Working with both individual soldiers (employees) and drill sergeants (managers), we are helping to create an army of Douglases who can turn their most difficult experiences into catalysts for improved performance.

Optimism Is the Key

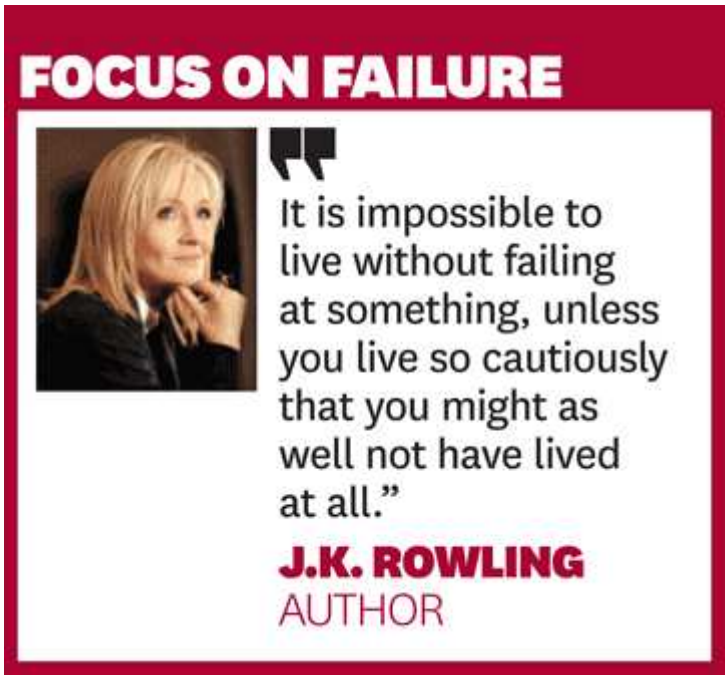
Although I'm now called the father of positive psychology, I came to it the long, hard way, through many years of research on failure and helplessness. In the late 1960s I was part of the team that discovered "learned helplessness." We found that dogs, rats, mice, and even cockroaches that experienced mildly painful shock over which they had no control would eventually just accept it, with no attempt to escape. It was next shown that human beings do the same thing. In an experiment published in 1975 by Donald Hiroto and me and replicated many times since, subjects are randomly divided into three groups. Those in the first are exposed to an annoying loud noise that they can stop by pushing a button in front of them. Those in the second hear the same noise but can't turn it off, though they try hard. Those in the third, the control group, hear nothing at all. Later, typically the following day, the subjects are faced with a brand-new situation that again involves noise. To turn the noise off, all they have to do is move their hands about 12 inches. The people in the first and third groups figure this out and readily learn to avoid the noise. But those in the second group typically do nothing. In phase one they failed, realized they had no control, and became passive. In phase two, expecting more failure, they don't even try to escape. They have learned helplessness.

Strangely, however, about a third of the animals and people who experience inescapable shocks or noise never become helpless. What is it about them that makes this so? Over 15 years of study, my colleagues and I discovered that the answer is optimism. We developed questionnaires and analyzed the content of verbatim speech and writing to assess "explanatory style" as optimistic or pessimistic. We discovered that people who don't give up have a habit of interpreting setbacks

as temporary, local, and changeable. ("It's going away quickly; it's just this one situation, and I can do something about it.") That suggested how we might immunize people against learned helplessness, against depression and anxiety, and against giving up after failure: by teaching them to think like optimists. We created the Penn Resiliency Program, under the direction of Karen Reivich and Jane Gillham, of the University of Pennsylvania, for young adults and children. The program has been replicated in 21 diverse school settings—ranging from suburbs to inner cities, from Philadelphia to Beijing. We also created a 10-day program in which teachers learn techniques for becoming more optimistic in their own lives and how to teach those techniques to their students. We've found that it reduces depression and anxiety in the children under their care. (Another way we teach positive psychology is through the master of applied positive psychology, or MAPP, degree program, now in its sixth year at Penn.)

In November 2008, when the legendary General George W. Casey, Jr., the army chief of staff and former commander of the multinational force in Iraq, asked me what positive psychology had to say about soldiers' problems, I offered a simple answer: How human beings react to extreme adversity is normally distributed. On one end are the people who fall apart into PTSD, depression, and even suicide. In the middle are most people, who at first react with symptoms of depression and anxiety but within a month or so are, by physical and psychological measures, back where they were before the trauma. That is resilience. On the other end are people who show post-traumatic growth. They, too, first experience depression and anxiety, often exhibiting full-blown PTSD, but within a year they are better off than they were before the trauma. These are the people of whom Friedrich Nietzsche said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

I told General Casey that the army could shift its distribution toward the growth end by teaching psychological skills to stop the downward spiral that often follows failure. He ordered the organization to measure resilience and teach positive psychology to create a force as fit psychologically as it is physically. This $145 million initiative, under the direction of Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, is called Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) and consists of three components: a test for psychological fitness, self-improvement courses available following the test, and "master resilience training" (MRT) for drill sergeants. These are based on PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—the building blocks of resilience and growth.



Testing for Psychological Fitness

A team led by the University of Michigan professor Christopher Peterson, author of the Values in Action signature strengths survey, created the test, called the Global Assessment Tool (GAT). It is a 20-minute questionnaire that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses and is designed to measure four things: emotional, family, social, and spiritual fitness. All four have been credited with reducing depression and anxiety. According to research, they are the keys to PERMA.

Although individual scores are confidential, the GAT results allow test takers to choose appropriate basic or advanced courses for building resilience. The GAT also provides a common vocabulary for describing soldiers' assets. The data generated will allow the army to gauge the psychosocial fitness both of particular units and of the entire organization, highlighting positives and negatives. At this writing, more than 900,000 soldiers have taken the test. The army will compare psychological profiles with performance and medical results over time; the resulting database will enable us to answer questions like these: What specific strengths protect against PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide? Does a strong sense of meaning result in better performance? Are people who score high in positive emotion promoted more quickly? Can optimism spread from a leader to his troops?

Online Courses

The second component of CSF is optional online courses in each of the four fitnesses and one mandatory course on post-traumatic growth. The implications for corporate managers are more obvious for some modules than for others, but I'll briefly explain them all.

The emotional fitness module, created by Barbara Fredrickson, a professor of emotions and psychophysiology at the University of North Carolina, and her colleague Sara Algoe, teaches soldiers how to amplify positive emotions and how to recognize when negative ones, such as sadness and anger, are out of proportion to the reality of the threat they face.

Family fitness, too, affects work performance, and cell phones, e-mail, Facebook, and Skype allow even soldiers on combat duty, or expats on assignment, to remain intimately involved with their families. A course created by John and Julie Gottman, eminent psychologists specializing in marriage, focuses on building a variety of relationship skills—including fostering trust, constructively managing conflict, creating shared meaning, and recovering from betrayal.

The social fitness module, developed by John Cacioppo, a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago and an expert on loneliness, teaches empathy to soldiers by explaining mirror neurons in the brain. When you see another person in pain, your brain activity is similar but not identical to what it is when you yourself are in pain. The module then asks soldiers to practice identifying emotions in others, with an emphasis on racial and cultural diversity. This is at the heart of developing emotional intelligence—and diversity in the U.S. Army is a way of life, not just a political slogan.

The spiritual fitness module, created by Kenneth Pargament, a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University, and Colonel Patrick Sweeney, a professor of behavioral sciences and leadership at West Point, takes soldiers through the process of building a "spiritual core" with self-awareness, a sense of agency, self-regulation, self-motivation, and social awareness. "Spiritual" in CSF refers not to religion but to belonging to and serving something larger than the self.

> The response to trauma includes shattered beliefs about the self, others, and the future.

The mandatory module, on post-traumatic growth, is highly relevant for business executives facing failure. Created by Richard Tedeschi, a professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the Harvard psychologist Richard McNally, it begins with the ancient wisdom that personal transformation comes from a renewed appreciation of being alive,

enhanced personal strength, acting on new possibilities, improved relationships, or spiritual deepening. The module interactively teaches soldiers about five elements known to contribute to post-traumatic growth:

1. Understanding the response to trauma (read "failure"), which includes shattered beliefs about the self, others, and the future. This is a normal response, not a symptom of PTSD or a character defect.

2. Reducing anxiety through techniques for controlling intrusive thoughts and images.

3. Engaging in constructive self-disclosure. Bottling up trauma can lead to a worsening of physical and psychological symptoms, so soldiers are encouraged to tell their stories.

4. Creating a narrative in which the trauma is seen as a fork in the road that enhances the appreciation of paradox—loss and gain, grief and gratitude, vulnerability and strength. A manager might compare this to what the leadership studies pioneer Warren Bennis called "crucibles of leadership." The narrative specifies what personal strengths were called upon, how some relationships improved, how spiritual life strengthened, how life itself was better appreciated, or what new doors opened.

5. Articulating life principles. These encompass new ways to be altruistic, crafting a new identity, and taking seriously the idea of the Greek hero who returns from Hades to tell the world an important truth about how to live.

Master Resilience Training

The third and most important component of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness is the master resilience training for drill sergeants and other leaders, given at the University of Pennsylvania; at Victory University, in Memphis, Tennessee; at Fort Jackson, South Carolina; and by mobile teams working with troops in Germany and Korea. MRT can be seen as management training—teaching leaders how to embrace resilience and then pass on the knowledge. The content of MRT divides into three parts—building mental toughness, building signature strengths, and building strong relationships. All three are patterned after the Penn Resiliency Program and use plenary lectures, breakout sessions that include role playing, work sheets, and small-group discussion.

Building mental toughness.

This segment of MRT is similar in theme to the online emotional fitness course for individual soldiers. It starts with Albert Ellis's ABCD model: C (emotional consequences) stem not directly from A (adversity) but from B (one's beliefs about adversity). The sergeants work through a series of A's (falling out of a three-mile run, for example) and learn to separate B's—heat-of-the-moment thoughts about the situation ("I'm a failure")—from C's, the emotions generated by those thoughts (such as feeling down for the rest of the day and thus performing poorly in the next training exercise). They then learn D—how to quickly and effectively dispel unrealistic beliefs about adversity.

Next we focus on thinking traps, such as overgeneralizing or judging a person's worth or ability on the basis of a single action. We illustrate this as follows: "A soldier in your unit struggles to keep up during physical training and is dragging the rest of the day. His uniform looks sloppy, and he makes a couple of mistakes during artillery practice. It might be natural to think that he lacks the stuff of a soldier. But what effect does that have on both the thinker and the other soldier?" We also discuss "icebergs"—deeply held beliefs such as "Asking for help is a sign of weakness"—and teach a technique for identifying and eliminating those that cause out-of-kilter emotional reactions: Does the iceberg remain meaningful? Is it accurate in the given situation? Is it overly rigid? Is it useful?

FOCUS ON FAILURE

THE 13-MONTH CALENDAR

Around the time of the Crash of 1929, HBR got behind a movement to shift to a 13-month calendar. The variation in number of days, the theory went, **caused business reporting discrepancies**. Objections that a new calendar would change most of our **birthdays**, holidays, and anniversaries was **dismissed** in a feature story as **sentimental**.

Finally, we deal with how to minimize catastrophic thinking by considering worst-case, best-case, and most likely outcomes. For example, a sergeant receives a negative performance evaluation from his commanding officer. He thinks, "I won't be recommended for promotion,

and I don't have what it takes to stay in the army." That's the worst case. Now let's put it in perspective. What's the best case? "The negative report was a mistake." And what's the most likely case? "I will receive a corrective action plan from my counselor, and I will follow it. I'll be frustrated, and my squad leader will be disappointed."

Building signature strengths.

The second part of the training begins with a test similar to the GAT—Peterson's Values in Action signature strengths survey, which is taken online and produces a ranked list of the test taker's top 24 character strengths. (See the sidebar "What Are Your Strengths?") Small groups discuss these questions: What did you learn about yourself from the survey? Which strengths have you developed through your military service? How do your strengths contribute to your completing a mission and reaching your goals? What are the shadow sides of your strengths, and how can you minimize them? Then the sergeants are put on teams and told to tackle a mission using the team members' character-strength profiles. Finally, the sergeants write their own "strengths in challenges" stories. One sergeant described how he used his strengths of love, wisdom, and gratitude to help a soldier who was acting out and stirring up conflict. The sergeant discovered that the soldier felt consumed by anger at his wife, and the anger spilled over to his unit. The sergeant used his wisdom to help the soldier understand the wife's perspective and worked with him to write a letter in which the soldier described the gratitude he felt because his wife had handled so much on her own during his three deployments.

What Are Your Strengths?

The Values in Action signature strengths survey measures 24 positive character traits, among them curiosity, creativity, bravery, persistence, integrity, fairness, leadership, and self-regulation. Participants rank statements on a scale from "very much like me" to "very much unlike me" to determine the areas in which they shine. Here is a sampling:

I find the world a very interesting place.

I always identify the reasons for my actions.

I never quit a task before it is done.

Being able to come up with new and different ideas is one of my strong points.

The third part of MRT focuses on practical tools for positive communication. We draw on the work of Shelly Gable, a psychology professor at UC Santa Barbara, which shows that when an individual responds actively and constructively (as opposed to passively and destructively) to someone who is sharing a positive experience, love and friendship increase. (See the sidebar "Four Ways to Respond.") The sergeants complete a work sheet about how they typically respond and identify factors that may get in the way of active and constructive responses (such as being tired or overly focused on themselves). Next we teach the work of the Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck on effective

I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition.

I am always willing to take risks to establish a relationship.

I always admit when I am wrong.

In a group, I try to make sure everyone feels included.

I always look on the bright side.

I want to fully participate in life, not just view it from the sidelines.

You can take the survey free at authentichappiness.org.

praise. When, for example, a sergeant mentions specifics (as opposed to saying something general like "Good job!"), his soldiers know that their leader was paying attention and that the praise is authentic. We also teach assertive communication, distinguishing it from passive or aggressive communication. What is the language, voice tone, body language, and pace of each of the three styles, and what messages do they convey?

Four Ways to Respond

In master resilience training we explain and demonstrate the four styles of responding: *active constructive* (authentic, enthusiastic support), *passive constructive* (laconic support), *passive destructive* (ignoring the event), and *active destructive* (pointing out negative aspects of the event).

Here's an example: Private Johnson tells Private Gonzales, "Hey, I just got a promotion."

Active constructive

"That's great. What are your new duties? When do you start? What did the captain say about why you deserved it?"

Passive constructive

"That's nice."

Passive destructive

"I got a funny e-mail from my son. Listen

Enhancing mental toughness, highlighting and honing strengths, and fostering strong relationships are core competencies for any successful manager. Leadership development programs often touch on these skills, but the MRT program brings them together in systematic

form to ensure that even in the face of terrible failures—those that cost lives—army sergeants know how to help the men and women under their command flourish rather than flounder. Managers can change the culture of their organizations to focus on the positive instead of the negative and, in doing so, turn pessimistic, helpless Walters into optimistic, can-do Douglases. Frankly, we were nervous that these hard-boiled soldiers would find resilience training "girly" or "touchy-feely" or "psychobabble." They did not; in fact, they gave the course an average rating of 4.9 out of 5.0. A large number of them say it's the best course they've ever had in the army.

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We believe that MRT will build a better army. Our hypothesis is being tested in a large-scale study under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Sharon McBride and Captain Paul Lester. As the program rolls out, they are comparing the performance of soldiers who have been taught resilience by their sergeants with that of soldiers who haven't. When they are finished, we will know conclusively whether resilience training and positive psychology can make adults in a large organization more effective, as they have done for younger people in schools.

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Martin E.P. Seligman is the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book is Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being (Free Press, 2011), from which this article is adapted.

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