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# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

## When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Become Resilient<sup>1</sup>

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

**H**ave you ever skidded on black ice at work? Slammed into a wall in a relationship? Or watched helplessly as a close friend or family member passed away?

Unfortunately, dread calamities befall *all* of us. Yet many of us act like the iconic 20th-century dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: We mentally don our now-scruffy black tuxedo or once-shimmering gown and try to glide across the heretofore smooth dance floor.

### WHY WOULD ANYONE TAKE SUCH STEPS?

We often adopt this approach because we don't want anyone to see our discomfort or pain. "Please don't think less of me," we mumble to the world around us. And then we start dancing as fast as we can, in the hope that our co-workers, boss, neighbors, friends and even family members won't see the truth.<sup>2</sup>

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN DANCING ON THE HEAD OF A PIN DOESN'T WORK?

Twenty-three-year-old Jeni Stepien didn't have the luxury of masking her pain. The small Pittsburgh suburb in which she lived—Swissvale, Pennsylvania—had only 9,000 residents, so everyone knew what happened to her and her family. Ten years before, around midnight, her dad darted down an alley on his way home from his job as head chef of a local restaurant. It was probably a shortcut 53-year-old Michael Stepien routinely took. But that September night, a 16-year-old teenager lay in wait. According to court documents, the young man wanted to buy rolling papers.<sup>3</sup> When he accosted Michael at gunpoint, his victim said he didn't have any money. Michael Stepien was shot at close range.

The prognosis was grim. No hope, actually. So the Stepien family "decided to accept the inevitable" and donated his organs through an organization called the Center for Organ Recovery and Education. This organization allows donor families and the recipients to keep in touch with one another after a transplant.<sup>4</sup>

Three hundred miles away, in New Jersey, 62-year-old Arthur Thomas was near death, too. Sixteen years earlier he had been diagnosed with ventricular tachycardia, a malady characterized by improper electrical activity of the heart. By this point, his heart's ability to function as a pump was inadequate to meet his



body's needs. He was days away from dying from congestive heart failure.

"In order to get to the top of the transplant list, you have to be really hurting," Thomas, a father of four, recently observed. "Once I had my transplant, I, of course, decided I would write a thank-you to the family."

The Stepien family's loss saved Thomas' life. And perhaps he also saved theirs. Monthly letters, phone calls and emails resulted from his initial contact. The families traded cards at Christmas and flowers on birthdays. Yet they never met in person. Or even considered it, until the day Jeni Stepien became engaged. "Who will walk me down the aisle?" she wondered. "It would be so incredible to have a physical piece of my father there."

At her fiancé's suggestion, Jeni wrote to Thomas, to ask him to walk her down the aisle. He assented. "If I had to, I would've walked [to Pennsylvania]," he said. "I felt wonderful bringing her dad's heart to Pittsburgh."

Jeni Stepien and her fiancé married in the same chapel in which her parents had wed, only three blocks from where her father was murdered.

Many people wouldn't have had the courage to confront the strong feelings this experience probably engendered. Indeed, "Mr. Thomas ... warned Ms. Stepien that his emotions might get the best of him."

"Don't worry," she told him. "I'll be right there with you."

When they met the day before the wedding, Arthur Thomas told Jeni Stepien to grip his wrist, where his pulse is strongest. "I was thinking," she later recalled, "My dad is here with us, and this man is here with us because of *us*."

### HOW DOES JENI STEPIEN'S STORY DEMONSTRATE RESILIENCE?

The ability to turn something bad that happens to you into something good, for yourself and possibly others, is called resilience. It's a quality that can be developed, like a muscle. And

then, similar to a rubber band, it can help you bounce back after a negative experience, even something as bad as your father being killed.

“Resilience,” explains Rockefeller Foundation President Dr. Judith Rodin, is:

[T]he capacity of any entity—an individual, a community, an organization, or a natural system—to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from a disruptive experience. As you build resilience, therefore, you become more able to prevent or mitigate stresses and shocks you can identify and better able to respond to those you can’t predict or avoid. You can also develop greater capacity to bounce back from a crisis, learn from it, and achieve revitalization. Ideally, as you become more adept at managing disruption and skilled at resilience building, you are able to create and take advantages of new opportunities in good times and bad.<sup>5</sup>

#### HOW CAN YOU BUILD GREATER PERSONAL RESILIENCE?

Resilience involves awareness, employing a range of capabilities, coordination of functions, self-regulation, and the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances.<sup>6</sup> A simple process called the “Three Good Things” exercise has been scientifically shown to be effective in increasing it.<sup>7</sup> I’ve been doing this exercise for several weeks now, and have found its results surprising.

#### Three Good Things Exercise<sup>8</sup>

Each day for at least one week, preferably before bed, write down three things that went well for you that day, and provide an explanation for why they went well. It’s important to create a physical record of your items by writing them down; it is not enough simply to do this exercise in your head. The items can be relatively small in importance (e.g., “my co-worker made the coffee today”) or relatively large (e.g., “I earned a big promotion”).

As you write, follow these instructions:

1. Give the event a title (e.g., “co-worker complimented my work on a project”).
2. Write down exactly what happened in as much detail as possible, including what you did or said and, if others were involved, what they did or said.
3. Include how this event made you feel at the time and how this event made you feel later (including now, as you remember it).
4. Explain what you think caused this event—why it came to pass.
5. Use whatever writing style you please, and do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling. Use as much detail as you’d like.

6. If you find yourself focusing on negative feelings, refocus your mind on the good event and the positive feelings that came with it. This can take effort but gets easier with practice and can make a real difference in how you feel.

In addition to building resilience, research subjects who participated in the exercise reported lower depression, lower burnout, less conflict with colleagues, fewer disruptive behaviors, better work/life balance and better sleep quality. The subjects got home on time more often, skipped fewer meals, and ate fewer poorly balanced meals.<sup>9</sup>

For my part, I discovered that the good things that happened to me seemed to be the result of both choice *and* coincidence. In addition, I realized I could come through unsettling events, like not being chosen for a job I desired, better than I imagined. Above all, the “Three Good Things” exercises have made me feel as if I’m tying up loose ends in my life. For example, last week I went to a bereavement group and released the guilt I felt about my mother’s suicide when I was a baby.

“Life is a game with terrible odds,” the playwright Tom Stoppard observed. “If it were a bet, you wouldn’t take it.” Of course, resilience can’t change the odds; however, it can help you handle the uncertainties. ■



Dr. Doreen Stern is a writer, motivational speaker and success coach in Hartford, Connecticut. Her dream is to become a best-selling author. She’s currently writing a book about creating the courage to tell the truth. She can be reached at [Docktor@DoreenStern.com](mailto:Docktor@DoreenStern.com).

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Able to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change (available online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilient>).
- 2 D. Viscott. (1996). *Emotional Resilience: Simple Truth for Dealing With the Unfinished Business of Your Past*. New York: Harmony Books.
- 3 <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/east/2011/02/25/Man-convicted-in-fatal-shooting-of-passer-by/stories/201102250222>
- 4 This and the following quotes are from an article available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/fashion/weddings/bride-is-walked-down-aisle-by-the-man-who-got-her-fathers-donated-heart.html>
- 5 J. Rodin. (2014). *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World Where Things Go Wrong*. New York: Public Affairs.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 M.E. Seligman, T.A. Steen, N. Park and C. Peterson. (2005). “Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions.” *American Psychologist* 60(5): 410.
- 8 <http://ggja.berkeley.edu/practice/three-good-things>
- 9 <https://cbpowerandindustrial.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/three-good-things-a-resiliency-exercise/>