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## Hurricane Katrina: Resiliency, The Other Side of Tragedy

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**IT WAS LABELED** as one of the greatest natural disasters in the history of the United States. And while the devastation brought on by Hurricane Katrina was bad enough, it proved to be only a prelude to the subsequent flooding of New Orleans in the wake of breaches in that city's system of levees. Overnight it seemed as though New Orleans went from being one of our most vibrant cities to a city in shambles and eventually, to a ghost town. Now, more than a year later, reports tell us that while recovery has occurred to some extent, New Orleans is a long way from returning to the city it once was. And let us not forget that while New Orleans has received the lion's share of media attention, the states of Mississippi and Alabama suffered unspeakable losses at the hands of Katrina as well.

So how do the residents of these areas, many of whom are our federal court colleagues, come back from such an overwhelmingly devastating experience? The stories of the human side of this disaster have been both heart-wrenching and inspiring. It is the inspirational side of these stories that I want to focus on in this article, because there are important lessons to be found on the other side of this tragedy.

History is rich with stories of those who have triumphed in the face of overwhelming odds, prompting us to wonder, "How does this happen?" One answer can be found in a human state known as resiliency. Note that I called resiliency a state, as opposed to a trait, meaning that resiliency is more "developmental and apt to be influenced by environmental factors" (Norman, Luthans & Luthans, 2005). Thus, resiliency can be learned.

Before going on, I should define the term resiliency. Simply put, resiliency is the ability to "bounce back" from difficult circumstances. Masten & Reed (2002) define resiliency as "the consistent positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity or risk." The phrase "positive adaptation" in this definition refers to an individual's achievement of success as defined by the threatening situation. So there must first be a perceived threat in order for there to be resiliency. The threat must be legitimate and with a "statistical probability" that the threatening event will, in fact, occur (Norman, et al. 2005).

Clearly, the threat of Hurricane Katrina was real and had a high probability of occurring. The only question left for those in its path was “How do we survive?” However, much more than “surviving” was at stake here. The residents of the tri-state target area were to be faced with surviving, assessing, planning, rebuilding and then moving on, none of which could be accomplished successfully in the absence of resiliency. So it’s safe to say that great numbers of the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama satisfy the resiliency requirements. The past year has shown their “consistent positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity” (Masten & Reed, 2002).

Are there, then, components or factors that we can employ that enable a person to become resilient? The American Psychological Association (2005) has identified a number of factors and strategies that one can study and employ in order to build resilience. In the following, I’ll review some of these factors and strategies.

### **Caring and Supportive Relationships**

One of the most consistent factors that the literature shows is associated with resiliency is the ability to build and maintain caring and supportive relationships. Those who constitute these relationships include spouses, significant others, neighbors, co-workers, church/pastor, and community.

In the aftermath of Katrina, many who would normally fit into these categories were themselves victims. Some had lost everything and had to permanently relocate. Thus the challenge for others now becomes establishing new circles of support. This can be a daunting task.

First, there’s a need to mourn what was lost. Whenever we lose contact with someone we love and care about, there’s a period of adjustment, perhaps even grieving. So before we can move on, we need to transition into a life without that person or persons. And it’s important to remember that this process is always a subjective one, meaning it will take the time it takes.

As we adjust to a life without those from our old social network, we strive to find the balance again. Given that we are social beings we eventually will begin reaching out to others again. We’ll be looking for that friendly face, an outstretched hand, someone who will laugh and cry with us, someone who will keep our secrets, and provide us with unconditional acceptance. These are among the things we lose when we are left without caring and supportive relationships and these are the things we again hope to find in order to get us through such tragedies.

### **Other Factors Associated with Resiliency**

In addition to the capacity for building caring and supportive relationships, resilient individuals also display the following characteristics: a) the capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out, b) a positive self-image and confidence in your strengths and abilities, c) the ability to communicate skillfully and solve problems, and d) the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses. (American Psychological Assoc., 2004)

As mentioned, these are characteristics researchers find in those whom we would label as resilient. The good news is that characteristics such as these can be learned. There are identified strategies

people can employ to build resilience in themselves.

### **On Building Resilience (American Psychological Assoc., 2004)**

#### *1) Make Connections*

As mentioned, in many instances the victims of Katrina were challenged not only with relocating their families and their lives but also with finding a sense of normalcy again. For some, this literally meant starting over. They were faced with the challenges of starting life over in a different state and a different town with different neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Fortunately many traveled with family, so those networks continued even though all were traumatized to varying degrees by the storms. There's much to be said for coming through a tragedy together. Family can be critically important for physical and emotional survival during crises.

Still, as time goes on, other vital connections need to be made. If survivors had a church community in their former existence, this new relationship needs to be forged. The need to establish new community ties is also very important as survivors move on with their lives. However, one critical area that should not be ignored is the community of survivors themselves. Many stories from tragedies such as Katrina relate instances in which survivors relied on each other and new connections were formed. These connections can be vital sources of strength and support as survivors rebuild their lives.

#### *2) Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems*

There's almost nothing that the human spirit cannot recover from. This particular skill reminds us to focus not on what has happened but rather on how we choose to respond to what has happened to us. We often hear that life is a matter of perspective or that perspective is reality. The choices we make and the behavior we exhibit as a direct result of those choices are directly tied to our perceptions. If we choose to be problem solvers, if we choose to find a way to move beyond the current challenge, we will almost always succeed. The critical message here is that there is something we can control in the midst of crises, and that is our response.

#### *3) Accept that change is a part of living*

Many would say this is easier said than done. Katrina and its aftermath represented what was, for some, unspeakable change in their lives. It's almost impossible to predict the long-term effects a tragedy of this proportion will have on someone's life, though it is safe to say that the long-term impact can be profound. Adjusting to change is seldom easy, especially when the circumstances bringing about that change have been forced upon us. No one asked for Katrina to come calling. Again, it's a matter of accepting that often we cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we choose to respond. Taking responsibility for the fact that we do have this kind of control and acting upon it can make the difference between surviving a tragedy and not surviving it. Accepting change is a day-by-day effort. Exercising control over our lives following a tragedy can offer us victories, large and small, and each of these is critically important to surviving and moving on.

#### *4) Take care of yourself*

It is very easy to get caught up with the external challenges following a tragedy. In fact, we can all but ignore our own needs. The physiology of stress is a daily reminder for us. Our bodies do what they were designed to do to combat the daily grind and give us the capability to manage life's challenges. Under the stress of a tragedy such as Katrina, the strain on the body can be enormous and the impact can be felt for months, if not years following the event. The reason for this is not only the intensity of Katrina's impact but also the duration of the trauma and subsequent physiological impact. The potential for the creation of gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, respiratory, and musculoskeletal disorders is very real in the aftermath of a tragedy of Katrina's magnitude. Lachman (1972) stated that "the longer a given structure is involved in an on-going emotional reaction pattern, the greater is the likelihood of it being involved in a psychosomatic disorder."

We can help to minimize the impact of severe stress on our bodies by working to ensure a few simple behaviors. First, make sure we do our best to feed our bodies. During stressful times, we may experience a drop in the hunger response. Nevertheless, our bodies need fuel to function. So we should try to eat even in small portions, on a regular basis, and to take fluids. Second, exercise continues to be one of the most effective means for burning off the chemical dumping that occurs during a significant stress response. This doesn't have to be anything more complicated than walking. It's important to acknowledge that getting any exercise time beyond an occasional walk when we are in the midst of coping with a major traumatic event may be impossible. Finding time to rest/sleep may also prove a daunting challenge in the midst of a tragedy, so survivors must do the best they can. Fortunately, our bodies are designed in such a way that seriously neglecting any of the three basic areas I've mentioned will manifest itself in one way, shape, or form through our body's responses during a traumatic event.

#### **Learning from the past**

Another method for building resiliency to cope with tragedies in our future is to look at how we have coped with tragedies from our past. Again, the APA offers some questions we can ask ourselves as a way of learning from these past experiences.

##### *1) What kinds of events have been most stressful for me?*

Take an inventory of past events and look at the types of events that have presented the greatest stress for us. Chances are these will be events for which we were least prepared, or perhaps they occurred at a time when other stressors were predominant and thus our psychological and physical guard was down. Assessing how we coped with events such as these can provide great insight as to how we are prepared to cope with similar events in our future.

##### *2) How have those events typically affected me?*

We each respond to the stressors in our life in a variety of ways. Another sub-question you can ask here is "how do I know when I am feeling stressed?" Generally your first response will be to recall some type of physical reaction you experienced, such as an upset stomach, headaches, muscle tension, profuse sweating, etc. It's important to understand that in these incidents when you have experienced these types of reactions there is almost always a dominant thought or group of

thoughts that preceded these reactions. How we think about a situation will often dictate how we ultimately respond. And the good news here is that we can control our thoughts.

3) *To whom have I reached out for support in working through a traumatic or stressful experience?*

This question brings us full circle back to the beginning of this article, where I discussed the importance of maintaining a social support network in building resiliency. Unfortunately, when tragedies such as Katrina occur, a person may find him or herself without some or all of this traditional social network. However, in many instances we do have others we can turn to. Given this, the question is “Have we reached out and to whom?” If we haven’t, we should ask ourselves why we haven’t. If we have, we can then think of how helpful those contacts were and who we might turn to again. By nature, we are social beings, and as such we do have a basic need for social interaction. Acknowledging this and building these networks long before a tragedy occurs will go a long way toward helping us to sustain and support ourselves at a time when we need this the most.

### **Final Thoughts**

Resiliency can be learned. Resiliency training can and should be developed at the individual, managerial and organizational levels. The first step is to take a personal or organizational inventory identifying and assessing the tools that currently exist in the resiliency arsenal. Then, identify the holes that need to be filled. The goal here is to do this before a tragedy occurs. Of course, real-life tragedies offer, in one respect, great learning opportunities for each one of us. As recommended in this article, determine what lessons have been learned regarding how we have dealt with past traumatic events. Then, take an in-depth look at the factors associated with resiliency that we currently have in place and develop strategies for building upon those factors.

Tragedies will continue to befall us. Traumatic events will continue to alter our lives forever. What we can control in all of this is how we choose to respond to these inevitable events. Building resiliency is buying insurance that will help sustain us through difficult times.

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