

SOS Détresse

Resilience or What makes out my crisis expertise

“Fall down seven times, stand up eight.”

Japanese proverb

*“My strength did not come from lifting weights.
My strength came from lifting myself up when I was knocked down.”*

Bob Moore

“Hope is not the conviction that something is going well, but the certainty that something has meaning, no matter how it goes.”

Vaclav Havel

Crises are hard to endure, exhausting and strenuous. Crises often meet us quite unexpectedly and dramatically. They remind us of something that once was painful and they inflict new wounds. The loss of a job, an incurable disease, a bereavement. Children who leave the house leaving behind a gap, a separation, being a single parent, the partner experiencing a midlife crisis, the change from professional life into retirement. Migration, war-time experiences and expulsion from one's native country, accidents and natural disasters, living through physical and/or emotional violence, all this can go far beyond what is tolerable. And misfortune seldom comes alone. Life gives us, gives you, tasks and challenges that want to be resolved.

Perhaps after a crisis you have already wondered how you managed to get out of a misfortune. Or what drives you to look for solutions. Perhaps you are also astonished at yourself and wonder what it was exactly that made you look ahead after this difficult situation.

Resilience is the constructive attitude when dealing with stressful events, life situations and strokes of fate.

In the following text, we would like to give you helpful suggestions to better cope with crises and to focus on the resilience that may already be within you or which you may discover on closer observation.

What does resilience really mean?

Researchers call resilience the inner toughness which helps some people to cope with heavy loads without going to pieces. This strength, if not already firmly anchored, can be acquired in all phases of life[1]. It describes a forcefulness that helps master the ups and downs of life and even offers a chance to grow from these experiences.

Resilience means more than just being a roly-poly doll: it means controlling oneself and not having the feeling of being at the mercy of external circumstances.

Resilience is made up of various factors including optimism, acceptance, self-responsibility, solution orientation and a forward-looking attitude as well as the ability to build relationships that provide support in difficult life situations[2].

Resilience is also characterized by how stress-resistant a person is, how he regenerates himself and also how able he is to process and successfully integrate the letdowns of his own biography.

Resilience as immune system of the soul

Similar to the physical immune system, you can strengthen your mental immune system as well as your resilience. From previous crises you may already have acquired some resilience and experience on how to deal with stress, how to “digest” or successfully integrate demanding experiences.

All these experiential values could be of use to you when your body signals that something is wrong: Or is it your mind with the same thoughts running around and keeping you awake? Is it your stomach rumbling when you are thinking of a particular situation or is it your heart racing when you are under pressure or severely challenged job-wise? Then your body could be the soundboard of your soul telling you to look more closely at what the problem is.

The more consciously and carefully you observe yourself and recognize (warning) signals at an early stage, the better you can apply or increase your resilience. Similar to the physical immune system, you build up your strength which allows you to better cope with crises.

Perhaps you remember your last crisis situation in which you felt wretched but then saw light at the end of the tunnel: Perhaps because you accepted the inevitable. After a time of revolving around the problem, you have reflected on your strengths and have looked ahead.

Do you know the story about the two frogs that fell into a bucket of cream?

One was disheartened. After a short while he stopped struggling and drowned. The other frog did not give up. He struggled and struggled until the cream turned to butter. This enabled him to climb out of the bucket.

Perhaps you have an idea how you might “climb out of the bucket”? Perhaps you already belong to those who do not give up and know what you need? Perhaps you are one of those who are just becoming aware of the resilience that has so far slumbered in you - unheeded?

The turning point between the worlds: the old behind me, the new still ahead of me

You may know this feeling of uncertainty, insecurity or restlessness. Or a throbbing sound in your head, a dry mouth, butterflies in your stomach like before leaving for an unknown country, or you may feel a dizzy sensation when looking down from a height. Do you know this or a similar feeling when on the threshold of something new, when it feels like there is no turning back?

How can people succeed in taking something positive out of crises, upheavals, failures and disappointments, something that makes them more alive and ultimately makes them grow?

It is the natural order of things that children will leave the parental “nest”. The mother, who for years has met the children’s needs, feels emptiness when this finally happens. She grieves and fear gets a grip on her. But then she succeeds in finding access to her own needs.

A man learns that he is terminally ill. He plunges into a crisis, he struggles with himself and with his life, with his hitherto missed opportunities. He shuts himself off from his family and friends, he is unapproachable for a long time. After spending time on his own, he can re-establish contact with people he cares about and who want to offer him support and affection. Now he can accept them well.

A family must flee from their native country. For the first time in a long while they feel safe in the country that has given them shelter. But there everything is different: the language, the culture, the food, the climate, the small apartment, the school. This gives rise to conflicts in the family and the couple often argue. Everyone is homesick. The adults are not afraid to openly discuss this and thus, together, they will develop solutions.

In the crisis, all these people have mobilized their own forces despite unfavorable initial situations, general conditions or unalterable facts. They did not give up but remembered their strengths. That gave them confidence to face the future.

These people have looked at what they themselves can tackle in this situation in order to return to what is personally good for them. However, this meant first of all to throw off ballast and leave something behind which was perhaps also unpleasant or painful.

Resilience also means bearing growing pains

This condition can feel like severe growing pains reaching to the core which we would

rather not have or get rid of as soon as possible. Thus resilience also includes the ability to accept what we can't change. And that in the midst of the painful process of growth which is the gain of the resilience force. Hence, like a tree which grows bigger and adds an annual ring each year, this also applies to resilience. Each growth and the associated pain will add a bit more wisdom and strength.

The woman or mother who had to let go of her children; the man who has to live with his illness and the family who dares a new beginning: they all have become aware that they have to pass through this bottleneck in order to progress.

This can be unpleasant and also lead you to your breaking point during your personal crisis. Maybe it can help you to think about what has helped you ease the pain when you were in a similar situation.

Fear and grief as allies

In this process, it is entirely normal to be afraid: fear of the "empty nest" when the children leave home, fear of pain or death, fear of fleeing, fear of the unknown. These fears are completely individual and express themselves in different ways.

Grief can set in similar to fear: letting go of grown-up children, mourning the life we cannot lead like we used to due to illness, losing one's home and family.

If you are able to look at these feelings with compassion for yourself, you have the chance to finally care for long-standing bottled-up wounds, and perhaps also to cure them. Grief and anxiety will then become your helpful companions in caring for yourself. Fear and grief will seem less threatening and painful.

You may identify with one of the following examples or you have made your own individual experiences.

The mother, who is also a woman, who becomes aware that she has not lived her womanhood for a long time. The sick man who has hitherto kept his family together and who is allowed to ask for support. The family which has lived for a long time in uncertainty and fear (of death) and which can now consider itself safe. They can adjust to the new culture or start a new life.

Qualities and resources

Beside fear and grief as allies, resources and qualities serve as a counterbalance. These will characterize you. Some need to be discovered or rediscovered.

Just like the mother who gave up her favourite pastime, dancing, and has now enrolled in an evening course. Pleasure and energy return as well as the fun to be in contact with other people. Through this contact she finds access to her new job as a tutor.

After a long period of parting grief, the man finds strength in nature. Going out alone does him good. Now and then he helps out in a neighbouring nature conservation

center. He can accept the support offered to him. His family and friends experience him now much more open and lively.

Bit by bit, the family is doing better at their place of refuge. Although they know that there are still some obstacles to overcome till they have settled down, they face the future with confidence. They can look ahead and become part of the society, each in his own way.

As the examples show, resources can be very diverse. This also applies to what you call your resilience. It is worth looking for what gives you strength in these situations. It is also helpful to look at your personal successes and what you have contributed to achieve them.

Thus, it takes much individual work to explore one's own feelings. Searching for resources is comparable to finding a rough diamond. This then also needs several stages of cutting and polishing to make it sparkle in all its beauty. This radiance gradually becomes visible and will be noticed by your surroundings. Perhaps you realize that you have a different effect on your environment and that you can also approach people differently.

Stretch a net before you let yourself fall

Resilience also means having a secure network in a time of crisis: trusted persons in the family or among friends / colleagues. This also includes other people who may be important for your issues: be this a professional group with the same goal, a self-help group, a counselling centre, a therapist.

The more stable your network is the better it will hold when you fall back on it. Then you can also let yourself go. Friendship is a "give and take". There is a time when you can give just as there is a time when you can "take". In such situations you are permitted to do this. Just as you are then permitted to bother other people with how you are feeling.

You may also notice that during this time you do not feel at ease with different people. Likewise, it is then okay if you protect yourself or temporarily withdraw. Reflect on who makes you feel better and what gives you energy.

Life goes on - the first step!

By becoming aware of your new-found potential, you return from the crisis back to life, at your pace, with your abilities. Perhaps you will feel like after a visit to the sauna: refreshed, tired and at the same time deeply relaxed. Perhaps you would first like to lie down and rest. At the same time, now is probably the right moment to take the first step. You will become more active and you will emerge mentally strengthened from the crisis.

Resilience works by taking slow and small steps. They have their own personal resilience. At the same time, you also need patience with yourself to build up resilience. The more loving you are to yourself, the more you will notice the small, subtle changes. You will be going through a process, without haste and without comparing yourself to others. You may also celebrate the successes that you see best yourself. The positive vitality that you now feel can radiate from within.

Perhaps this will help you to be more conscious of the next crisis and to be even more aware of yourself.

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Samuel Beckett

[1] quoted from: Each “I” is many parts – Use the traits within ourselves as a resource, Jochen Peichl

[2] quoted from: Society for Resilience GbR