

Building Resilience for Hard Times

In these days of financial insecurity* we all feel like we're all about a half step away from a big change for the worse. For example, big Information Technology companies saw 4th quarter profits fall precipitously because other big companies couldn't invest to upgrade systems this year because they can't get credit or because their customers aren't spending as much on Christmas as usual. Belt tightening means that unexpected layoffs are always in the wings. You might not get a pink slip the first time they are handed out, but what about next time? Just in case the pink slip ever does come, what can you do now to be ready to handle it? How will you handle other impacts of the current economic downturn?

For any given event such as losing a job, some people come out better than others. Part is luck, but a large part is how they manage their emotions and thoughts about the event, how much energy they have for facing the change, and what kind of resources and talents they've accumulated in good times to be able to weather bad times.

This series covers four ways that you can prepare yourself to weather a major challenge such as a job loss. They all involve habits of thought and behavior that get easier with practice, so it makes sense to practice them even if a loss never comes. Even if you are facing the loss right now, they can help you manage your way through it.

In summary, the four steps are

1. Calm down your amygdala – the part of your brain that mobilizes the fight or flight response. This step has to come first because otherwise negative emotions narrow your thoughts so much that you can't do the remaining steps. There are some very simple calming techniques. It is helpful to practice your ability to calm yourself, but it is never too late to start.
2. Spend time remembering pleasant times, things you are grateful for, and times you have been appreciated. Intentionally invoking pleasant emotions makes you more resourceful about what comes next.
3. Reframe your thinking about the loss to put yourself in as confident a position as possible. There are specific ways to structure your thinking in a tight spot.
4. Inventory your resources, abilities, and useful connections. Take your thinking away from the loss to focus on what you have not lost. If possible, start your inventory before the loss occurs and update it periodically.

If the loss has not come, practice so that the steps are easy for you. If it has come, don't feel alone. Join the people who used these steps to survive and then flourish.

*Originally published by the Anita Borg Foundation in 2009 for members concerned about possible layoffs. The reasons for insecurity have changed, but they always exist.

Part 1: Calm Down at Will

Negative emotions such as fear or anger cause swift physiological changes to prepare us to fight, flee, or freeze. Negative emotions are more powerful than positive ones because quick responses to threats meant survival in our early evolution. Positive emotions could be put on hold.

However fight and flight responses are often not effective for the kinds of threats we face today. Think about the most recent threats you have faced. Perhaps your spouse failed to get a position he wanted. Perhaps your child brought home a bad report. Perhaps your manager gave you a bad review. Perhaps you overheard someone saying something negative about you. Perhaps you felt disappointed with your own performance during a presentation. Or perhaps you just lost your job. None of these requires instantaneous action. Running away or fighting back are possible responses, but they are unlikely to be the ones that help the most.

Negative emotions can hinder your ability to deal with the subtle ongoing threats of modern life:

- They put you in a state of arousal that depletes your physical energy.
- They crowd out positive emotions and memories of assets.
- They narrow your thinking.

So the first step for dealing with a negative event is to calm down your physiological response to threat. Do this before trying to rethink the situation, before trying to strategize about possible actions, before saying anything that you might later regret.

Here are approaches that work for some people. Experiment to find your own best approach.

- Name the emotion without judging it. Say to yourself “I am afraid,” or “I am angry...” and do not try to talk yourself out of it. Research shows that naming without judging has a quick calming effect on the amygdala, the part of the brain that controls the fight-or-flight response.
- Meditate, for example by breathing deeply and regularly and pay close attention to your breath as it goes in and out.
- Exercise. Physical exertion has a calming effect. Research even shows that taking your dog for a walk is more calming than walking by yourself.
- Practice tai chi or yoga

People who regularly practice meditation, tai chi, or yoga are usually able to calm negative emotions more quickly, since they have built the skill with practice. But even if you haven't been practicing, it is not too late to start when you feel a sense of panic coming on. Name that emotion, watch it without trying to make it go away, breathe deeply, and seek a calm state that leaves space in your mind for new ways of thought.

Part 2: Experience Positive Emotions

Now that your brain is calm, you have made space to experience positive emotions about the good things that remain in your life. Research shows that experiencing positive emotions prepares you for creative problem-solving. Noted psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has formed the Broaden and Build Theory: positive emotions broaden your behavioral repertoire and build durable resources such as confidence, social connections, and good health. As she says in her book, *Positivity*, “The latest scientific evidence tells us that positivity doesn’t just *reflect* success and health, it can also *produce* success and health. ... Beyond the present pleasant moment, your positivity has downstream consequences for the very trajectory of your life,” (pp 18-19)..

Experiencing positive emotions, such as joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love, makes you more open-minded and creative. They broaden the scope of your attention and the range of possibilities that you are willing to consider. In fact, Fredrickson has found that people who experience more positivity in their lives are more able to cope with adversity in an open-minded way.

Here are some ideas for intentionally increasing your positive emotions there are more ideas in *Positivity*.

- Develop a ritual of ending the day by remembering 3 good things that happened during the day. Some people write them down in a journal to reread later. Other people share with their partners or children. See Jen Hausmann’s Three Good Things: A 7 Year-Old’s View of the Three Blessings (<http://pos-psych.com/news/jen-hausmann/20070403191>) for an example.
- When you say goodbye to someone, summarize the good things that came out of being together. When you finish a project, summarize what you gained by being involved. If you like to journal, write them down so that you can reread and remember them later.
- Collect a scrapbook that shows ways that you have made a positive difference to others. Include notes, comments, and recommendations they’ve made for you. Capture oral praise either by writing it down or associating it with an image in your scrapbook.
- Do something kind for someone else. In fact, keeping a daily tally of the kind things that you already do can raise your positivity.
- Visualize your best possible future in detail. What would you be doing? Who would you do it with? How would you spend your time? What would you achieve? What would a day be like? Visualization activates the same parts of your brain that are activated when you actually do those actions, so it’s a chance to rehearse while you increase positivity.
- Spend time learning about your strengths. Take the Values-in-Action signature strength test and then think about ways your strengths manifest in your life and ways to use them more.
- Find places nearby where you can spend time with nature.

Part 3: Reframe Your Thinking

Calm and broadened by positive emotion, you are ready to examine your thoughts about the negative event. Are your thoughts undermining your confidence? Could you think about it in a different way that still acknowledges the reality of the situation but puts you in a strong position for your next steps? The ABCDE technique below is one way to reshape your thinking.

A is for Adversity. Describe what happened? Just the facts.

- I just lost my job.

B is for Belief. Describe your uncensored, ticker-tape beliefs. The rawer the better. Beliefs often come in the following categories:

- Loss of self-worth: They think I'm not worth much.
- Violation of rights: How could they do this to me, after all the effort I've put into the company?
- Negative comparison to others: I must be doing worse than the people they are keeping.
- Future threat: Nobody else is going to want to hire me.

C is for Consequences. Identify the feelings and behaviors that arise directly from Beliefs. The above categories of beliefs have predictable consequences on the way you feel.

- Loss of self-worth → Sadness and depression
- Violation of rights → Anger
- Negative comparison to others → Embarrassment
- Future threat → Fear and anxiety

D is for Disputation. Find other interpretations that fit the facts but have different consequences.

- My skills are more important for companies that are growing than ones that are cutting back.
- My company would only do this because times are really hard.
- Our company is cutting into the muscle now. They will really miss my skills.
- Many very good people have been laid off from one job and found ones that they like better.

E is for Energy. Observe the state of your mental and emotional energy for next steps.

See [*The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles*](#) by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté for more about these steps and for other techniques for building resilience to face adversity. Examples of ABCDE in action can be found in Nick Hall's [Is feeling better as easy as ABC?](#) and my article, [The Reframing Skill at Work](#).

Part 4: Take Inventory of Your Assets

Now that you've calmed yourself, experienced positive emotions, and come up with a better way of thinking about the adversity, you can start working on what comes next. Get started by turning your attention away from what you have lost and toward what you can carry forward.

Here are some categories to help you take inventory of what you've accumulated that can help you take the next step:

- **Strengths:** What can you do especially well? What activities most absorb your attention and make you feel energetic? Curious? Read [Using Strengths When You Work](#).
- **Relationships:** Give thanks for your close family ties and friendships, and prepare to keep your work connections, even if you are about to leave a job. Using a social networking service such as LinkedIn is one way to create connections that survive when either of you moves around. LinkedIn is like an automated roll-o-dex where you don't have to maintain the information on the cards. While you have access to your internal company directory and buddy list, send invitations. You may also want to ask people to write recommendations for you that can be posted on LinkedIn or other services. Not everybody will respond, but if you ask now, you may get useful statements about your past accomplishments and working style that will raise your confidence and be useful to potential employers.
- **Personality:** Spend some time increasing your self-awareness and learning about your preferences. How do you work best? Do you like to work alone, with a partner, or in large groups? Do you like detail work or abstract work or a combination of the two? Are you good at problem solving or creating things from scratch or encouraging other people or keeping projects running or any of the wide range of abilities needed to make things happen? There are numerous self-discovery instruments available on the Web or from your employer, including instruments for measuring grit, optimism, gratitude, meaning in life, and other psychological factors at the Authentic Happiness site.
- **Experiences:** Have you dealt well with serious adversity in the past? If so, what were the skills and thought patterns that brought you through? Do you have experience grieving from losses and then being able to let them go? Do you have a rich store of positive memories that you can spend time reliving? What are your biggest accomplishments? Do you have the information collected to explain them to future employers?

People tend to downplay their personal resources and assets accumulated over years of work. Now is the time to focus on them. Talk them over with close friends since that will help you get the most out of them. Create reminders such as lists, photographs, or scrapbooks that you can draw on when you need to remember all you have going for you.