Talk About Living!
Suzanne Zoglio, PhD

The Art of Bouncing Back

Just as life seems to be going great, you get hit with an unexpected blow. Your car breaks down and the bill depletes your vacation fund. You go for a routine dental exam and find you need a root canal…and you have no dental insurance. A work colleague announces he just got a great promotion …the one you thought was yours. Life is full of bumps in the road. Some are larger than others, but they're all destabilizing.

So how do you bounce back from financial setbacks, health concerns, and life's disappointments? Moving on is often easier said than done, but three techniques can make you more resilient: venting, going to the balcony, and solution sleuthing.

Since none of us likes to be seen as a whiner, complainer, or emotional wimp, you might be tempted to just take the hit and bury your feelings. While putting on a brave front might be appropriate at work or in front of strangers, it won't help your rebound. Putting on a happy face when you're churning inside is like spraying lilac deodorizer in a smoke-soaked room. You don't get rid of the stench; you just end up with a *different* stench. Instead, it's far more productive to stir things up and air your feelings with a trusted friend or confidante. Expressing your anger or sadness allows you to process your feelings and be comforted. As you do, some weight is lifted and the numbness or pain will likely lessen. The loss is still there, but a caring ear reminds you that you're not alone.

When you "go to the balcony" you put the disaster in perspective and are reminded of your strength. Using a wide-angled lens, consider what crises you've survived in the past – perhaps even worse than this. You might even rate the current challenge compared with other disappointments. Studies have shown that rating a stressful situation on a scale of one-to-ten reduces our stress response to the event. Once you've climbed to a bird's eye view, you may also be able to see if there's anything good about the event. The break down happened close to home? You won't need emergency surgery when you're out of the country? You got a wake-up call about your boss' opinion of you? From the balcony, we gain perspective on the severity of a stressful event, our past capacity to survive, and on any blessing hiding behind the disaster.

When you've vented and broadened your perspective, you might try what I call "solution sleuthing." You solution sleuth by turning complaints into questions. For instance, when you catch yourself thinking "My vacation just went down the drain with that car repair," try turning the complaint into a question. "What vacation can I can take on half the budget?" "How can I replace my vacation money by June?" Complaints drain the brain; they are statements of resignation. If repeated often they can make us feel powerless, stressed, and even depressed. Anything that reduces our perception of control increases stress and saps our energy. Questions, on the other hand, beg to be answered. They are energizing and help us find new direction. The answers motivate us to move forward.

Suppose the next time life presents you with an unexpected blow, you confide in a friend, create a broader perspective, and find a new path forward. You not only bounce back, but come back even stronger than you were before. Talk about living!

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