

Focus on resilience: Bouncing Back from Setbacks

Lucy Miller

Lucy Miller: When I was asked about a month ago to send my notes to the CART reporter, I was busy and thought of taking the lazy way out and sending her the same notes I used last year. Then I thought again, and I realized that it was October 11th-- exactly one month after the disaster in New York. So I started thinking, this is going to be a different workshop. In September we all shared something really big. It made me think about my own resilience process. I'll begin by giving you a definition of resilience.

Resilience is the ability to recover readily from illness, adversity, or any major misfortune or change. Synonyms include buoyancy, elasticity, and springing back. And, of course, a setback is any kind of reversal, upheaval, defeat, upset, loss, failure, or traumatic incident. This is what we all experienced just six weeks ago.

On September 11th I had flown from where I live, on a small island in the middle of the ocean, to San Francisco for three days. I packed only a little overnight bag. I planned to fly back home Tuesday, September 11th and when I got to the airport they would not let us in. I didn't know what was happening. They were talking. I couldn't understand them.. I went back to the hotel that I had just checked out of and they let me back in. Then I began to find out what had happened. Of course, my first reaction was shock and denial.

I spent the next few days just wandering around like a lost soul trying to get home. Other people could drive or take trains and buses, but I had no other choice but to wait--not only for the San Francisco Airport to reopen, but my home airport was one of the last ones to reopen. Finally on Saturday, I was able to fly home. Being deaf didn't help matters. The minute we landed and I knew I was home, I began to cry. So it took me five days to begin to feel the grief. Before then, I was just numb. That's how long I waited to allow the feelings in. And I think psychologically, I needed to be safe at home before I could let go of the feelings, even though it was not a conscious process. At this point I wanted to be alone. I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to talk to anybody except through E-mail. I did work, but other than working, I didn't want to be around anybody. This is my process.

Three and a half years ago, my husband died. He was one of the first members of ALDA. I thought I was doing pretty well with that loss when this happened in September, when suddenly I began to feel the loss of my husband as if it was still fresh, because I needed him so badly.

People react differently to stress. There are basically two types of reactions. Cognitively-oriented people who are in their heads a lot, tend to require emotional distance. They want information and use problem solving to reestablish control during their recovery. And I realize later that is where I was. That first week, I needed to be away from people.

Affectively-oriented people, on the other hand, are people who live more in their hearts than their heads. They tend to prosper from emotional expression and need cathartic ventilation. This means

that talking about it over and over and feeling it and crying is what helps them. They need a good listener. Somebody who is there to listen and show they understand.

Many of us are some of both types. And maybe, as I found in September, as well as other times of loss, you start out with one and then move into the other.

So, the important message here is that we each have to respond in our own way in our own time. There is a wide range of emotions. In dealing with people who have survived trauma I have learned that we need at least six weeks to begin to recover. First of all there is simple survival to consider; food, shelter, all of those things. Only then can you start processing emotions. And if you do it too soon, your body will tell you are not ready. You need to do what you need to do. This is true of losing someone you love. This is true of losing your hearing, anything. People who say, "get over it" you can tell them where to go.

We all have a pattern of coping. Sometimes we bury our feelings. Sometimes we go from one response to the other. After I got over needing to isolate myself, I wanted to be around people again, and I realized this is what I have done most of my life.

The time it takes to begin to recover varies with each of us. There is a very broad normal range in terms of time. Some of us seem to move faster than others. If we start to worry that we're not moving fast enough, it can make matters worse. In the psychology diagnostics world, they say that it can become a problem, meaning, abnormal, if you stay stuck in the worst of it for more than six months. After six months, if you still are not able to get out of bed and not able to stop crying or not able to sleep or get back into the normal functions of life even somewhat, then it's time to get professional help.

Bouncing back is a funny word. When they talk about resilience, they talk about rebounding. But I sometimes think of it more as a crawling out of a hole. Not too many of us really bounce back like rubber balls. Although sometimes you can keep bouncing and bouncing and bouncing. That, too, can be part of the recovery. But it is good to think about what helps you come out of it, and how did it help? And, of course how could this help you again in the future? What can you take from a past experiences and apply to perhaps what is happening now, and keep it somewhere in your memory for future help?

Keeping a journal can help. Sometimes I may not be ready to talk to someone else but I am ready to talk to myself and my God through my journal. We know life is a journey. We look at the progress we're making. We don't always know where we're going, but sometimes we know when we have gotten off the road and want to get back on. Sometimes a detour leads us to wonderful new places we never knew about. Sometimes there is turbulence. Sometimes there are delays. Sometimes we even have to make U-turns. But it is a continuing journey.

One common denominator that studies have shown is of help is the use of a support group of some kind. Whether it is a group or an individual. By coming to ALDA, you've all done that.

There is a ceremony that the Dalai Llama has done. Imagine that you have only one opportunity every hundred years. If you choose not to take advantage of this you will have to wait another hundred years.

Imagine this: there is a room of a thousand demons. Open the door and walk in. The room is not very big. Once you enter, the door will close behind you. On the inside of the door there is no knob. To get out, you will have to walk across the room to another door. And that is all you have to do, my friends, to become enlightened. This is called the Room of One Thousand Demons.

Those one thousand demons have the ability to take on the form of your fears. As soon as you walk into the room, those demons will show you your worst fears. If you are afraid of heights, when you walk in the room, it will appear as if you are standing on the narrow ledge of a tall building and so forth. These demons will take on those images from your mind and make them seem very real. In fact, they will be so compelling real, it will be hard to believe they are not. No one can come in and rescue you. That's the rule. If you go into the room of a thousand demons, you have to make it out on your own. Some people never make it out to the other side. They go into the room of a thousand demons and become paralyzed with fright and they stay trapped in that room until they die.

What happens is up to you. If you don't have to go through it you can wait until your next incarnation and come back in another hundred years and try again. But if you do want to go in, we have two hints that will help you. The first hint is as soon as you go inside, remember, keep reminding yourself, that what those demons are showing you isn't real. It's all from your own mind. It is an illusion. Of course, most of the people go in there and stay trapped in there forget that. It is very difficult to keep it in mind when you see yourself surrounded by demons. The second hint is that once you walk into that room, no matter what you see, no matter what you feel, no matter what you think, keep your feet moving. If you keep your feet moving, you will eventually get to the other door.

Adversity has a way of bringing those demons right into our lives. When things are going well we forget about these demons and ignore them. When things are not going well, they appear in full force, until we have learned how to manage them. So we have to remember to keep walking. Keep walking. Keep working your way through the demons. Stay on that road.

Dr. Lucy Miller is a marriage and family therapist whose practice has long included deaf and hard of hearing clients. She also teaches, consults and has recently completed a novel What Beth Heard. She has presented workshops on relationships, communication and resilience in previous ALDA cons. drlucy@pop.lava.net