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Make a difference in the world by being resilient

by Rich Heffern



Robert Wicks

BOUNCE: LIVING THE RESILIENT LIFE

By Robert J. Wicks

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As more and more of us face financial insecurity, longer work hours and the increasingly complex personal and social demands of our fast-paced, multitasking, high-tech lifestyle, finding healthy ways to handle stress is more important than ever.

*Robert Wicks is a leading expert on stress. His prescription for handling it is to become more resilient. A professor of pastoral counseling at Loyola University in Maryland, his most recent book is *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life* (Oxford University Press). His other books include *Riding the Dragon: 10 Lessons for Inner Strength in Challenging Times* and *Prayerfulness: Awakening to the Fullness of Life* (Sorin Books).*



NCR: What is resilience and why is it important to have?

Wickss: Resilience is the ability to meet, learn from, and not be crushed by the challenges and stresses of life. Each of us has a range of resilience formed by our heredity, early life experiences, current knowledge, and our level of motivation to meet life's challenges and enjoy each day to the fullest, no matter what happens.

If we become the most resilient person we can be, new positive realities and perspectives arise and flourish in the most surprising ways.

Each of us has an opportunity to become deeper and more compassionate in response to the stressors in our lives if we are aware of some basic practices to contain and understand stress, are mindful, reasonably self aware, and can learn how to maintain a healthy sense of resilience and perspective.

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A good example of resilience was, for me, a physician I heard interviewed who was working in Somalia during a devastating famine. He was approached by an interviewer from U.S. public radio and asked, "Doctor, there is carnage everywhere here, children are dying in such numbers that you are stacking them up in the corner like firewood. How can you stand it?"

The physician answered, "When you watch this horror on television you are overwhelmed by it, aren't you? Well, we feel the same in country, but there is one difference. You can't lose hope as long as you are making friends."

That's a perfect example of that ability to have a sense of perspective and resiliency. It's not the amount of darkness in the world that matters or even the amount in yourself, but how you stand in the midst of that darkness.

Novelist Walker Percy asked once, "What if you missed your life like a person misses a train?" It's easy to do today with all the multitasking we do and the stresses we face. When you have a sense of resiliency you are able to learn from and bounce back from stress. You not only limit the stress, you gain from it. It raises the quality of our lives.

Resiliency is a wonderful quality to have but it is also a gift to those who cross its path. Resiliency has an effect of positive contamination in society. Spirituality writer Frederick Buechner said: "People may forget what you said but they will never forget how you make them feel."

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Resilient people tend to open up a space for people where they can rest their burdens. People who are not resilient tend to contaminate that space with their own needs, their needs to be liked or be seen as helpful, right or in control.

How can one maximize that resiliency range?

People have the sense you are either born resilient or not. That's true but not entirely. Some people do seem to be more resilient from childhood but that's not the crucial issue for leading a fuller life. It's maximizing the range of our resiliency.

One of the best assets we can have to increase our range of resiliency is a well-rounded circle of friends. For all major religious traditions "community" is an essential element.

In my own work, both personal and professional, I have found that for the circle to be rich we need, at the very least, four "types" or "voices" present. These are the prophet, the cheerleader, the harasser and the guide.

The prophet's voice is often quiet and fleeting but nonetheless strong. She or he is living an honest and courageous life guided by truth and compassion. Having someone like that in our lives is never easy, but the prophet challenges us to look at how we are living our lives.

The cheerleader is unabashedly, enthusiastically and unconditionally accepting of us. Their love encourages us to do the right thing.

The harasser forces us to take ourselves less seriously, to laugh at ourselves.

Complementing all these is the guide, who listens to us carefully and then searches and looks for nuances in what we share with them in order to help us uncover the voices that guide us unconsciously.

It's dangerous to try to go it alone with no one to debrief with or cry with, with no one to laugh with and no one to really look at what's important. We've seen this in the church where people have designated leaders who feel they can't share things with people.

You cite three treasures from the Christian and Buddhist spiritual traditions -- solitude, silence and mindfulness -- as ways to cope with stress and become more resilient.

Many of the world's religions and ancient philosophies extol the benefits of solitude, silence and mindfulness. But their value has only recently gained traction in our world, and then only for its purely psychological worth.

A time apart is essential, not simply to take a breather, but to lean back into the now, by yourself, to take a breath and ask yourself: Have I been going to where I wanted to go?

Solitude and silence allow us to take a step back from societal and cultural forces and really get back to basics. If I don't take some time each day, I find myself lost and confused. I get up early -- 4:30 to 5 a.m. I get coffee and take a half hour by myself quietly sit. After that, my wife wakes up and I bring her a cup and we chat for half hour or so and look at scriptural readings of the day.

That time is essential. During the day I can tap back into it, fall back into that solitude moment. It's not a chore or a duty. It's my contemplative period, my time to center and breathe.

Fr. Henri Nouwen said that solitude is not being alone with yourself, but being alone with God; silence is not listening to yourself but to God. Silence intensifies and solitude makes the silence richer and deeper.

Mindfulness is key too. It is really amazing how much we fail to be present to the things around us. Mindfulness, when it's formal, is meditation; informal mindfulness is just being present to the people and events around us. Mindfulness can be learned.

Another way to increased resiliency is facing failure in a productive way. I've often told the groups of people in the helping professions I work with that they should fail more than any other group. With failure, you're able to reassess how you're doing, gaining a natural sense of humility. Knowledge plus humility equals wisdom. Add wisdom to compassion and you get love. Failure is a deepening factor that allows us to put things in perspective and move away from the savior complex.

Another path to increased resiliency is recognizing your own resistance to change. When I work with patients in psychotherapy I try to get them to be intrigued by their resistance to growth and change.

Make friends with resistance. The defenses you put up to resist change are exaggerations of your gifts. In those areas where we feel most vulnerable is where the most resistance often is. If you can become intrigued by it, then it becomes an exploration into your own inner self and what you can do.

Understanding resilience and practicing exercises that lead to self knowledge and mindfulness can deepen our resources and make a difference in the world.

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