

RESILIENCE

To Build Emotional Strength, Expand Your Brain

The quest to understand something new is a key factor to building the resilience necessary to weather setbacks and navigate life's volatility.

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This article is part of a series on resilience in troubled times — what we can learn about it from history and personal experiences.

Eight years ago, while working as an assistant Cuyahoga County prosecutor in Cleveland, Gayle Williams-Byers was in the throes of a serial killer case when she decided to take horseback-riding lessons.

This summer, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Ms. Williams-Byers, 46, now a South Euclid Municipal Court judge, started free online classes in American Sign Language offered by Gallaudet University in Washington. She also took a webinar in labor trafficking. In recent years, she has enrolled in a variety of classes and workshops, including one on how to get a commercial driver's license — not something she plans to act on any time soon.

"I don't have a reason to use these things in my professional life, but learning helps me to focus better," Ms. Williams-Byers said. "It's also something that I have some control over. I take classes in subjects I am just wildly interested in learning about it. When I expand my brain, my wingspan is greater. It lets you get a little higher, to get above the headwinds."

Ms. Williams-Byers' quest to understand something new is an example of what many career coaches, authors and experts view as a key factor to building the resilience necessary to weather setbacks and navigate life's volatility.

The theory: To deal effectively with change, it helps to be engaged in changing yourself. "One of the things that makes us resilient is that when we see a challenge, and when we face a struggle, we engage with it, rather than shut down," said Simon Sinek, author of "The Infinite Game" and "Start With Why."

"What I have learned from my career is that something I learned over here helps me over there," he said. "Even if I don't know that is happening, any kind of learning benefits all aspects of life."

Embrace Your Passions

Mr. Sinek, for instance, is a dance lover. "My dancer friends kept telling me I should take classes, and it would help me and my love of the medium. I begrudgingly agreed, and I took some basic ballet classes."

Even though it was for personal enrichment, those classes helped his developing work as a public speaker. "My posture is much better," he said. "I move more effortlessly across the stage from my hips, instead of my shoulders."

When you're in the process of learning, your viewpoint changes, and you spot connections that you never noticed before. "Resilience is about being adaptable in a variety of different circumstances," said Dorie Clark, who teaches executive education at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and is the author of "Reinventing You."

“It is a combination of being able to pick yourself up when there are setbacks, but also it is about having the kind of cross-training necessary to be flexible in an uncertain world where we don’t know what is around the corner,” Ms. Clark said.

Learning Requires Determination

This all may require pushing yourself — not the easiest of tasks in times of crisis. “If they are relatively senior professionals, it has been years, or decades, since they have not been good at something, and it can be enormously psychologically stressful to have to face that,” Ms. Clark said. “Inevitably, when you are in the early stages of learning something you haven’t done before, you are probably going to be bad at it — at least not very good.”

Two years ago, Ms. Clark entered a program to train as a musical theater lyricist. “People in this program have master’s degrees in musical theater writing,” she said. “At first, having to surround myself with people who truly had exponentially more expertise was humiliating on a regular basis, but it was invigorating and inspiring.”

Stay Curious

Being resilient has a lot to do with perspective. “People who commit themselves to a life of learning show up with curiosity,” Mr. Sinek said. “They show up with interest. They show up with a student’s mind-set. You don’t have to be curious about everything. You have to be curious about some things.”

Those who routinely and consciously engage in learning become more confident about their ability to figure things out once a crisis hits, according to Beverly Jones, an executive career coach and author of “Think Like an Entrepreneur, Act Like A CEO.” “Each time they hit a bump, they spend less time lamenting and quickly turn to determining what they must learn in order to climb out of the hole,” she said.

Moreover, learners develop a more optimistic mind-set, which helps them jump into action, according to Ms. Jones. “In part, this is because each time you become aware of learning something new it feels like a victory,” Ms. Jones said. “You maintain the positivity that is a key to resilience.”

Tailor Your Learning

An important element to remember is that people learn in different ways, Mr. Sinek said. “I can’t read a book a week. I learn by having conversations. I like talking to people who know more than me about any particular subject. I love peppering them with questions. And I love trying to say back in my own words what I think they are telling me to see if I understand it.”

Right now, with his speaking engagements on hold, Mr. Sinek is studying kintsugi, the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with epoxy and a painted gold solution, which highlights the breaks. The concept: By accepting blemishes and flaws, you can produce an even sturdier, more striking, piece of art. On a deeper level, it functions as a symbol of the human experience.

For one thing, it requires patience. “It turns out the epoxy dries slowly,” Mr. Sinek said. “If you do all the pieces at once, it all just falls apart again. I want to be done with my project and move on to the next. I can’t. I have to stick one piece and hold it for an uncomfortable amount of time and then let sit for 24 hours.”

There are myriad paths to learning from taking part in a free online class to reading a nonfiction book to watching a documentary to a complete immersion in a grade-free educational experience.

Chip Conley, 59, for example, founded the Modern Elder Academy, in Baja, Mexico, a group dedicated to midlife learning.

The academy’s core curriculum is based on helping people move from a fixed to a growth mind-set in midlife and beyond, according to Mr. Conley. “Those with a fixed mind-set define success as winning, which becomes problematic when they face difficult circumstances,” he said. “Those with a growth mind-set define success as learning. They’re not trying to prove

themselves, but instead improve themselves, so they get less focused on the results and more focused on the journey.”

At the academy, options include collaborative bread baking, improv comedy, learning how to surf or do yoga for the first time and penning a poem to offer to your cohort.

Academic and Online Options

There are also educational opportunities for nontraditional students at some top universities through academic or yearlong programs for executives and other professionals. Students can audit classes, attend lectures, and work on projects with graduate and undergraduate students.

These include the Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute, Harvard’s Advanced Leadership Initiative, the University of Notre Dame’s Inspired Leadership Initiative, the University of Minnesota’s Advanced Careers Initiative, and the University of Texas at Austin, which offers the Tower Fellows Program.

Three years ago, Glenn Lowenstein, 60, was ready for a new challenge. The Houston resident had sold Lionstone Investments, the real estate investment company he founded in 2001, to Ameriprise. “It was a hard decision,” he said. “The business had been my dream, and then I lived the reality of it for 20 years, and all of a sudden there was a void. It was scary. When there is nothing in front of you, that’s where the resiliency has to come in.”

His solution was to return to campus. Two years ago, he was a Towers fellow. “You have to put yourself out there in an environment you have not been in before,” he said. “It’s a combination of confidence in yourself, enjoyment in exploration and going toward your fear.”

As a fellow, Mr. Lowenstein, for example, enrolled in an advanced graduate philosophy seminar. “It was way above my head,” he said. “I would try my hardest to follow every single word of the conversation. It was fascinating to me the way the graduate students articulated their arguments. It was super esoteric stuff, but I would walk out and be ‘wow, I am learning a new way to communicate here.’”

The best part, though, was his time on campus: “It was so cool to be in an environment where I wasn’t the expert,” he said. “I wasn’t the person relied on to know everything, so I could sit back and enjoy the process of learning, and that’s positive energy. My aim is to keep my mind and body and spirit healthy. I don’t think you can do that without learning.”

For those who can’t afford the time or money required for a high-level fellowship or university program, there are myriad paths to learning. Free or reasonably priced online classes are available through sites like Coursera, EdX, The Great Courses, LinkedIn Learning, MasterClass, Skillshare, TED Talks and Udemy.

Other options (online these days) include adult education centers, local libraries, community colleges and universities, and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. One Day University, a subscription service (\$7.95 a month), offers five livestreaming lectures a week and recorded talks.

For Ms. Williams-Byers, learning is “that extra oomph to turn off the crazy in life and pour yourself into something that is fantastic that you can benefit from,” she said.

That explains her decision to take up a new sport during a particularly difficult case. “I had dealt with murder cases before, but this was unsettling,” she said. “I could feel myself disconnecting from the case because of the emotional drain. The hourlong lessons refocused my mind, so I could bounce back when I returned to the office.”