

# Building your resiliency

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

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With perspective and a few tools,  
turn failure to your benefit.

*SUSAN\* is a critical care nurse who has worked diligently to advance up the clinical ladder in her organization. Her goal this year was to pass her critical care certification exam. She took a review course and studied for the test. Susan was devastated when she learned that she hadn't passed. Her confidence in her professional knowledge has plummeted, and she now finds herself second-guessing every decision that she makes. Her manager has urged her to accept the failure as a temporary setback and retake the test. Instead, Susan has been ruminating about why she did poorly on the test.*

Most of us can relate to the disappointment that Susan feels in not passing her certification exam. Failing to achieve an important goal, whether personal or professional, can test our self-confidence. But you've prob-

ably seen many examples in your own life of people who suffer an enormous setback yet somehow bounce back. This positive response is called resiliency.

Resilient people are able to use their skills and strengths to recover from problems and challenges. This can include small events or large ones such as job loss, financial problems, illness, natural disasters, medical emergencies, divorce, or a loved one's death. Those who lack resiliency might become easily overwhelmed by the same types of experiences. To regain her confidence in this situation, Susan will need to rebuild her resiliency, and her manager can help her. Here is how both leaders and staff can build resiliency.

## Why resiliency matters

Personal resiliency is deeply rooted in the habits of our mind as much as our values and beliefs. It's shaped by our personal experiences with adversity, our natural levels of optimism, the impact an experience has on our lives, our social support system, and our propensity to ruminate. Being attentive to building your resiliency has never been more important, especially for younger nurses. The American Psychological As-





## A moment of reflection

Reflective journaling can help you gain perspective on a difficult situation or setback. Use the following three-step framework to evaluate experiences that may be shaking your equilibrium.

- 1. Describe the experience or event.** Tell the story of what happened as objectively as possible, sticking to the facts. Include key details such as who was involved and where and when it happened.
- 2. Express your reaction to what happened.** Document your reaction to the event or experience as factually and objectively as possible. How did you respond? What were you thinking? How did you feel?
- 3. Identify your lessons learned.** Assess what you learned from both the event and your reaction to it. Have you identified how you might better cope with such events in the future? Is there a pattern in the way you react to events? What would you do differently if the situation occurred again?

Source: Roger and Petrie 2017

sociation reports that 12% of millennials have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, considerably higher than older generations. The reasons behind this are complex and may include a volatile global environment, competitive academic settings, financial concerns driven by student loan debt, and a relentless comparison to others through social media. The challenge with anxiety is that it can lead to catastrophic thinking and lowered resiliency.

You need resiliency for a long and productive nursing career. You'll never be able to eliminate or erase all of life's difficulties, so being resilient will give you the strength to tackle problems head on, overcome adversity, and move on with your life. Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, beautifully describes her own resiliency experience with early widowhood in her book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* as having to move to option B because option A was no longer there.

Resilient people learn to view a difficulty as a challenge, not a paralyzing event. They look at their failures as lessons to be learned from and as opportunities for growth, not as a negative reflection on their abilities or self-worth. The good news for Susan is that resiliency is like a muscle. It grows when we successfully navigate adverse experiences. To rebuild her resiliency, Susan will first need to gain perspective on her beliefs about failing the certification exam. Beliefs can be powerful. They shape our reality and play a key role in how we approach life.

## Gaining perspective on experiences

How we view adversity and stress strongly impacts our capacity to bounce back. Martin Seligman, a psychiatrist and national expert on resilience, believes that reframing how we explain setbacks to ourselves is the key to developing resilience. Like Susan, all of us periodically fail to achieve some of our goals. Everyone has crises in his or her life that shake confidence. To develop resilience, you need to stop seeing yourself as a victim during these downturns and become proactive in your recovery. Michael Hyatt has wisely observed: "Reality is usually a sliding scale and not a toggle switch." Things are rarely as good or as bad as we describe them. Resilient people understand that both positive and negative experiences can lead to transformational growth.

To regain perspective about the certification exam, Susan will initially need to change her beliefs about the situation. Her self-limiting belief could be that she equates failing the exam with failure as a professional. That's catastrophic thinking. She could instead view it as a fork in the road, not the end of the road. She'll also need to stop ruminating about the event. Rumination is taking a stressful event in your life and churning it over and over in your mind with *what if* or *if only* questions and thoughts. Researchers who've studied the impact of rumination have found that it not only leads to greater stress but also is a major barrier to resiliency. Negativity and rumination can become habits that need to be consciously managed. When negative thoughts occur, quieting the mind and being present with what is in front of you can break the cycle.

Reflective journaling is one way you gain clarity about experiences. (See *A moment of reflection*.) The act of writing down the story of what happened can help you find perspective.

## Building a resiliency toolbox

Once Susan gains perspective on her situation, she should consider implementing one or more tools that have been demonstrated to improve resiliency.

- **Adopt an attitude of gratitude**—Strong evidence suggests that gratitude promotes adaptive coping and personal growth. Being grateful makes us resilient by keeping us hopeful. It reminds us that we have the power to act and expands the possibilities. A widely used gratitude technique is listing three things daily that you're grateful for in your life or have gone well in your day. Some nursing units and departments have made this part of their end-of-shift huddle; it's a positive way to end the workday.
- **Focus on your strengths and past successes**—When you experience a failure such as Susan has, it's easy to lose perspective on what you've already achieved in your career and life. Drawing on your past successes can help restore your self-confidence. Evi-



dence indicates that knowing your strengths and talents and putting them to work can help power you through challenging situations.

- **Try meditation or yoga**—When your self-confidence is challenged, you can easily shift to worse-case scenarios by ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. Yoga and meditation are both designed to shift our attention to the present moment and reduce our anxiety about the what-ifs. These practices help us relax and slow time by being in the moment.
- **Improve your personal wellness habits**—Strong correlations exist between resiliency and our personal wellness habits. Sleeping 7 hours each night, eating a balanced diet, seeking fun in your life, and exercising all promote higher levels of resiliency. Taking time for self-care is especially important during challenging times to reduce our stress levels.
- **Surround yourself with a social support system**—Rebuilding your self-confidence can be very challenging without someone to be your cheerleader and accountability partner. Although confiding your struggles to others may be difficult, especially if you're known for your self-confidence, reach out to family, friends, and professional colleagues for support. Connecting with others can help us stop wal-

lowing in our situation, and sharing our goals with a trusted friend can help us get back on track.

### Be intentional

Rebuilding resiliency takes time and intentional actions. Susan's experience involving failure could ultimately provide her with some great life lessons moving forward. The goal is for her to regain her "mojo" so that she can take the certification exam with confidence and pass it successfully. ★

\*Name is fictitious.

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