

Resilience: The Art of Bouncing Back

by Suzanne W. Zoglio, Ph.D.

Whether you're a business leader, a stay-at-home mom, or a loyal employee of large company, you probably have taken risks, gone out on a limb, and stuck your proverbial neck out more than once. You might even count yourself among a gutsy bunch. Perhaps you invest in projects others call edgy, make tough decisions that others avoid, say things that need to be said, and act on your convictions with unusual confidence. But what happens when the going gets rough, the risk doesn't pay off, and you are on the receiving end of an unexpected blow...to your pocket book, your security, or your heart? Consider these scenarios.

You own a computer services company doing \$1.5 million in sales and a customer representing 20% of total sales walks away citing "a paring back of vendors" as the reason.

A friend you have bailed out of more than one jam sues you for what he claims was negligence when your dog bit his son. The suit presents a potential liability of \$2.1 million and your insurance covers you to \$500,000.

For the last 4 years you've worked 24/7 for a start-up company that promised stock options to secure your future...but the company has hit a wall and just announced you will be among those laid off.

Such unexpected blows can be paralyzing. They hurt financially, emotionally, and can do a number on your otherwise unshakeable faith. So, if you're like most of us, you move from shock (this isn't really happening), through anger (those SOB's never were any good), to sadness (it's over-I'm done; no way out), before your internal tide begins to turn. Eventually, you realize that you have to regroup and move your life forward...no matter what's happened. You've got to bounce back. Although "bouncing back" is certainly easier said than done, here are three techniques that will make the uphill climb less arduous.

The first technique is venting. To understand the rationale for venting, consider how you would properly air out a room after a smoky poker game. You've got to stir things up to get the fresh air flowing. If you try to cover up the stench (i.e., with air fresheners) you just end up with a different stench. The same principle applies when you're dealing with a horrific blow...to your ego, your heart, or your bottom line. If you try to cover up your anger, confusion, or disappointment, you'll just end up with a different problem: misplaced anger and frustration. It's far more productive to vent - air your feelings - with a confidante who will listen non-judgmentally, while you ride the emotional roller coaster of "Why me?" and "Could I have avoided this?" Recently I had lunch with a small business owner who had just lost a major account. Although he told me of the bad news, he seemed reluctant to talk about the disappointment. "I won't bore you with my headaches," he said. But when lunch was over -- and he had indeed shared his anger, fear, and concerns -- he said, "Thanks for listening. I think I can start repairing the damage now."

Although your first tendency may be to handle things on your own, this is one time when it is productive to seek support from colleagues, friends, or family. As you describe the incident and relate your concerns, you begin a healing process that readies you for the rebound.

Once you have vented, acknowledging the pain, you are ready to "go to the balcony." This technique helps you to maintain perspective in the face of adversity. You view your situation with a wide-angle lens, shifting your focus from what you have lost to what you still have. For instance, when a customer walks away, you might recognize that you just hired a new salesperson so you are in a better position to replace the business. You may also get a better perspective on the actual consequences of the unexpected punch in the gut. Perhaps in the scope of things, the bad news is disappointing, but not devastating. From the balcony you might remember that you've weathered a similar setback before and it is likely that you will bounce back again. Perhaps you will even see an opportunity in the setback (to start that business you've always dreamed of)...or a lesson (increase the number of accounts to reduce your risk). Most people attest that adversity is a powerful -although painful- teacher.

Not long ago I worked with a client who was faced with a major lawsuit. It was all consuming at first; he couldn't eat, sleep or focus on business. Then one day we went to the balcony together and looked down on fifteen years of business success. He saw other crises that he had weathered; he saw a solid client base that remained; and he saw some competent legal folks that could carry much of the burden. In the end he said, "I sure wish this hadn't happened, but I guess we'll survive the challenge."

When you have vented and broadened your perspective of the situation, it is time to "solution sleuth." Solution sleuthing is your springboard to action. It requires turning each complaint into a question. For instance, instead of repeating to yourself, "I'm unemployed...I've lost my \$60,000 salary," try asking this question: "How else can I earn \$60,000 a year...or whatever I need...by working, investing, consulting, partnering or any other means?" The difference in your mind's reaction is enormous.

Complaints lead you to an intellectual dead end, while questions stimulate answers. Consider the difference between, "That ungrateful friend is going to ruin my life;" and "What would be a fair solution that I could live with?" Questions demand an answer, so your mind starts brainstorming, planning . . . creating solutions. My coaching clients tell me that when they apply this simple technique of turning complaints into questions, their energy increases, they feel more hopeful, and more primed for action. The "magic" is in breaking through the wall of complaints to access a whole reservoir of creative solutions just waiting to flow into your awareness.

Venting, balcony climbing and solution sleuthing. Add these three techniques to your life skills toolkit and you'll be better prepared to bounce back the next time you come face to face with an unexpected blow. © 2002, Suzanne Zoglio, Ph.D.