



Finding Strength in the Face of Tragedy

How Bad Times Can Become Good Beginnings

Glance at the front page of any newspaper these days and odds are good you will see the words “hard times.” Our national problems are spawning many personal woes, it’s true, but personal hard times can strike at any point... in your relationships, on the job, with the kids, and, of course, in matters of health. “Eventually your number is going to come up — bad stuff happens to everyone.” While there is much you can do to prevent trouble, some of it is simply the unfolding of life. The challenge, is to accept life’s blows as part of the journey, to learn from them and emerge stronger and wiser, rather than to create unnecessary drama that drags you down a path of misery.

We deal with hard times in several predictable ways. One approach is to cower and complain and use your bad luck to fuel comparisons to the experiences of others: “You think that’s bad, wait till you hear what happened to me!” But no one can possibly judge another’s hard time or determine whose is worse. Your tough time is tough and it is yours. Then there are those who take this concept of ownership too far, swrapping their hardship in a shroud of secrecy — such as the guy who got fired but tells nearly no one, pretending to many in his life that it simply didn’t happen. Or the person who suffers silently as a close family member spirals downward from substance abuse. Attempting to hide a hard time shows you don’t understand the most basic thing about it — everyone gets kicked by life sooner or later. The advice is to accept what happens in much the way we accept puberty — as a part of life filled with challenges and all sorts of feelings, including humiliation. We all experienced it and we all understand.

THE UPSIDE OF BAD THINGS

Being open about what is happening in your life offers several specific benefits. First it allows you to demonstrate your attitude toward the matter, and thus signal to others what you would like from them, be it a lot of help or a little. It also helps you process your emotions, far better than stuffing them inside and hoping they’ll stay put. When you’re having marital trouble, for instance, the last thing you might want from a friend is for her to turn into Sally Sunshine, reassuring you earnestly that everything will be just fine... but, on the other hand, you won’t benefit from constant hand-wringing and shrill assessments about how awful it all is. Hard times make people feel separate and isolated from others and, to some degree, from life itself. Try to let people around you know that you don’t want them to over- or under-respond to your struggle. Help them understand how to be supportive.

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In fact, the second benefit of sharing bad news is just that — an important opportunity to gather support. Many people secretly crave more attention from friends and loved ones than they get on a day-to-day basis. Ironically, tragedy can open that door, bringing you emotional support you need, which makes you feel loved. Be frank with others that you are devastated by debt, a diagnosis, a divorce... it will tell your friends and family that you need comfort and attention. Keeping matters to yourself will cut you off from what you need most.

FINDING THE WAY

Seen in the rearview mirror, hard times offer the opportunity to see how difficulties in the past have contributed to who you are today. To learn how the patterns and personality you developed over the years has shaped how you react to difficulties, Not to wait for another to hit. Make a list of awful experiences in your life, along with what you did to handle them — for better or for worse. Maybe you demonstrated amazing pluck publicly but consoled yourself each evening with pints of ice cream. Perhaps you shared nasty stories about the lover or boss who spurned you at every opportunity, but then cleaned every closet, lost 10 pounds and went to the gym daily. Or maybe you mostly just sat home and closed off the world. “The crucial thing to explore in this exercise is whether your pattern involved withdrawing... being destructive... or making changes that turned out to be productive. The more you know from your history including the traps you fall into and the ways you strengthen yourself to emerge better from a tough event, the better equipped you are to handle the hard times in the future,”

For all the pain hard times cause, the truth is they also come bearing a gift... really. Hard times force change. At first you probably won't like it, but a change — however dumped on you — presents the opportunity to do something different. Look around at those you know who were suddenly faced with loneliness during early retirement who started volunteering and met a whole new group of friends... who lost their home in a fire or flood and took the opportunity, then, to rebuild something they liked even better... or emerged from a painful breakup more capable and independent with a life that is more interesting, exciting and satisfying. And, there are many, many stories of cancer survivors who found an entirely new perspective on life after their diagnosis and treatment.

MAKE A PLAN

When life wallops you, Lauren says it is totally reasonable to throw a pity party and lick your wounds and feel dreadful about what has happened... for a while. (This advice does not pertain to people dealing with the death of a loved one — bereavement is a separate issue and for that

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we recommend finding one of many excellent bereavement experts to help guide you through.) You need this time to process the event and your feelings. You may even benefit from joining a group with whom you can share your feelings and thoughts if, for example, your teenager is in trouble or a spouse is seriously ill. This can help you to work through feelings faster and more thoroughly. Whether in a group or by yourself, the trap to avoid as you process your pain is blame... be it the world, your genes, your rotten luck or that old standby, other people. Blaming turns people into victims, a true no-win position.

How long you devote to feeling sorry for yourself depends on the harshness of the blow and the

reality of your current situation. If money is tight and you just lost your job, you obviously need to get a new one fast. Find people to talk to who will bring a fresh perspective. It is also important to do good things for yourself such as getting out for a long walk or taking a yoga class. "Seek out activities that are healthy and cathartic and will distract you from your problems. This will help re-engage you in what is good about life," Now is the time to refer to your list of past challenges... what were the skills you saw in yourself that you can draw on now to move ahead? Did you divert your attention to avoid behavior that would be unproductive? Did you get back on the metaphorical horse and try again? Our clients use the strength they gained from the past, avoid what didn't work and learn even more from the current problem. Whatever you do, don't give up and give in. "However bad it might seem at the outset, a hard time is yet another chance to rise to the occasion with choices and behavior that will turn you into a hero in your own life."