

THRIVE

The Power of Resilience

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Dedicated to those who have had to face and overcome struggles and adversity, and who are supporting others in their journey.



INTRODUCTION

Imbedded in the challenge is the gift.

Thirty-five years ago I would not have agreed with this statement, but looking back I realise and appreciate how true this statement really is.

It was a fairly normal summer's morning in Johannesburg. The sky was clear, things were peaceful and it was warm outside. My younger brother and I were up a little before 7am (we shared a room) and soon started talking, playing and laughing. Without warning, the door burst open and my stepfather stormed in. He was a short man, with a violent temper and very fragile ego. Unfortunately, our play and laughter had woken him up. He wasn't there to ask us to be quiet but to ensure that it never happened again. He began to discipline me with his favourite bamboo cane, striking me repeatedly like a practiced samurai for my perceived offence – disturbing his sleep. Fortunately for him, the welts were predominantly on my back so they would be fairly easy to hide.

I was in a lot of pain and struggling to get dressed, move freely and sit down. Knowing that it would draw attention from teachers, I was instructed to say that I had fallen. I fearfully followed the instructions but the teachers didn't buy into it and asked me to lift my shirt. Their shared eye contact said

everything there was to say. I'm positive that if this were to happen today I would be removed from my home environment, but back then, in the late 1970s, things were kept quiet.

What made this particular event unusual was not the physical or psychological trauma, as this was unfortunately a fairly common occurrence, but rather that the incident took place in the morning.

Like many children, I grew up in a home that was afflicted by alcohol abuse. Living in this environment meant that the evenings were more likely to be the time when abuse was commonly meted out. I used to dread 5pm as this was when the wine or spirits would come out and the cycle of hostility and conflict would begin. At first the drinking was fairly moderate, perhaps even a little festive, but with increasing consumption the verbal battles began and more often than not some form of trauma would invariably unfold. Visits to the hospital emergency room were not uncommon for joint dislocations, lacerations or even severe bruising.

As a young child, I was often caught in the middle of the crossfire between my parents and was a soft target for the offloading of anger, resentment and aggression.

When I got home from school every day and walked in the house my heart would start to pound, my palms began to sweat and my breathing became shallow. I had to be on high alert as I didn't know what was waiting for me; seldom was it good.

This struggle was further compounded by the stress of significant financial challenges in the home. We seldom stayed in a house for more than a year or two, either due to bank repossession or eviction for not paying the rent. This meant that any form of additional expense such as an extra after-school activity, sports equipment or even stationery for school was not affordable. At the same time, I would change schools a total of seven times over my school career and had to endure the accompanying stresses and challenges, not to mention the lack of friends and long-term relationships.

I did my best to stay away from the house during the day by hanging out

in the park and riding my bike for hours, but my main aim was to stay away for as long as I could at night.

By the age of 13, I had found a job as a waiter. While it wasn't legal to work at that age, I looked older due to the chronic stress I dealt with. Finally, I had found a routine that kept me safe. I would leave for school at 7am every morning, amuse myself for a few hours in the afternoon, briefly return home and change for my shift at the restaurant and then head off to work and return at approximately 10.30pm, by which time things would be quiet and calm at home. I worked six days a week and continued to do so for the next five years. While this gave me financial freedom and removed me from the challenges in the home, it did mean that I sacrificed sleep, my personal health and any opportunities to pursue sports, and it cost me an education.

I barely managed to stay afloat at school. All I aimed for was the lowest mark possible that would prevent me from failing. That's what adversity does – it strips us of our dreams and any ambition.

Sitting in class every day, I felt completely lost. I was exhausted and replaying the traumatic events of my life over and over again. My classroom experience was dominated by constant dreams of a different reality.

Ironically, despite my struggle with all other subjects, I was particularly good at history as it required the repetition of facts and events. But any discipline that required systematic process or demanded homework would be particularly challenging for me. Today, I would probably be prescribed methylphenidate (Ritalin or Concerta) for attention-deficit disorder.

In a token attempt to salvage my academic woes, one of the schools suggested I complete an aptitude test to determine my areas of strength and weakness. I've realised that I loved receiving any kind of attention as interest in my wellbeing was fairly limited at home.

Through a collaborative effort, I was taken to see one of the best practitioners and I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. As a lost teenager I needed to hear what I would be good at as all I heard was what my inadequacies were. I walked into the practitioner's office, had a short discussion with

him, filled out the necessary forms, performed some tests and tried to solve a few puzzles. Finally the time had come. I would have a target to aim for, a purpose and a mission outside of basic survival. Unfortunately the assessment outcome was not good. The 'expert' strongly believed that there was nothing I showed any aptitude for or towards and simply shook his head. I was gutted, but I had experienced so many failures and disappointments that I knew that was not going to be the last.

I, like so many children in the world, had become a victim of circumstance, powerless to change my reality.

During this time, I became intent on self-protection. There were times when I was able to take karate lessons for a month or two, but logistics (specifically needing a lift) and a lack of time would prevent me from taking it further. With the little formal training I had, I would practise for hours – punching, kicking, doing the basic katas and stretching. It was a tremendous comfort and a great source of confidence for me. Watching sport and the occasional martial arts movie would provide ongoing motivation in my world that appeared to be devoid of growth opportunities.

I felt a strong urgency to become physically stronger as strength was a powerful deterrent in the home I was growing up in. I began doing push-ups and sit-ups and I would exercise for hours on end in the gaps between school and work. Without any form of structure, guidance or equipment, I was my own teacher, motivator and mentor.

Needless to say, consistency, variety and progression were lacking, but I did the best I could under the trying circumstances. The larger struggle in my life at the time was not the abuse but the neglect as my life lacked any kind of support. This void was on an emotional level as well as in the form of practical assistance.

But everyone was trying their best under the circumstances and there were family members and even strangers who showed me kindness and care even when I was undeserving (I could be a handful at times), but it hardly

compensated for the emptiness I was feeling inside.

To compound matters, decades later I discovered that I have several gene variants that increase my vulnerability to adversity by amplifying my reactivity to stress and limiting my ability to recover from traumatic events.

By the age of 18 I had learnt the value of hard work and commitment but lacked many other life skills. The tools and traits that had served me well included an outgoing personality (I was forced to be), being open to new experiences and agreeableness. What I sorely lacked was an environment that was positive, encouraging, caring, attentive and empathic. Moreover, I would see my many failures and setbacks as a personal reflection of me and from the vantage point of a victim, and I was always looking to be saved in some sense. My emotions governed my reality and this is something that has taken me years to repair. I had no way of controlling my stress responses or regulating myself following challenging events. Lastly, I had neglected my health. I had no informed sense of diet, nutritional supplements, regular exercise or other basic health behaviours.

I had resigned myself to a life of mediocrity. With a poor education, low resilience, no major skills or aptitudes and a limited support base, the world felt like a hard and lonely place. I tried to spend some time overseas before my compulsory national service in an attempt to start my life over, but my internal struggles followed me – I found no ease, fulfilment or joy.

However, the turning point was around the corner. The thing I feared the most – compulsory national service – turned out to be the catalyst for positive change. The initial experience was not a success and in fact was a disaster due to my limited fitness and poor mental strength, but there was a turning point after about two months. The experience became a perfect masterclass in resilience. I was taught my first major life skills, which included the power of grit, persistence and perseverance. That period of my life showed me the immense value of support and the strength of a team, as up until then I had always been alone. I learnt that we all need to be positively challenged to

move forward in life. But by far the two greatest learnings included the lesson of the power of health behaviours and physical fitness in supporting our mental and emotional wellbeing and the value of hope – the sincere belief that your life is going to be better in the future.

Finally, at the age of 20, I truly believed I could do anything I set my mind to.

While these are incredible resilience skills and were the genesis of a new chapter in my life, the struggles of the past still held me captive, especially on an emotional front. Poor formative education followed me and I therefore found myself unable to study what I wanted, only what I could afford and what my academic achievements (or lack thereof) would allow.

The dreams that I had all but given up on were back on the table, namely a life in professional sport. The only difference was context, as I would be supporting the athletic development and growth of others.

With the new skills I had acquired in the military I channelled all my resources into learning and educating myself; after all I had become my greatest teacher. Learning from all sources and perspectives without limitation or restriction, my days, nights and weekends were dedicated to my former weakness but newfound strength – knowledge acquisition. My goal was to help the world's best athletes overcome their personal challenges and roadblocks.

I had a PhD in pain, failure, setbacks, disappointments and hurdles, which had all given me some incredible gifts. Empathy, compassion, heightened sensitivity and enhanced perceptual processes. This included the ability to predict the way people are going to move and their future actions. I was able to determine an opponent's levels of focus, confidence, competitiveness and intended actions.

Over the next two decades I continued adding to my repertoire of resilience skills, which included adaptability, consciousnesses and cognitive reappraisal – the most important trait of all.

What I came to realise is that we all have the ability to survive adversity and hardship. In fact, humans are hardwired for it. What defines resilience is

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not surviving but rather overcoming adversity. This reality is a learnt skill – a collection of behaviours and psychological traits that when unified allow us to realise our dreams and our fullest potential.

The intention of this book is to share those fundamental skills and provide you with the tools that will help you to better navigate the complexity that is life.