

## No Mud, No Lotus:

# Boosting Resilience When Life Is Tough

BY FATIMA DOMAN

“If you feel lost, disappointed, hesitant, or weak, return to yourself, to who you are here and now, and when you get there you will discover yourself, like a lotus flower in full bloom, even in a muddy pond, beautiful and strong.” — Masaru Emoto



Holding up a card from a woman whose husband, the father of their 4 year old son, had suffered a stroke, my yoga teacher Susan reverently opened class. The card simply said: “No Mud, No Lotus”.

The remainder of class we practiced yoga poses of strength in surrender—like the lotus flower that emerges victoriously clean above murky waters—representative of how each of us can overcome life’s painful challenges. In many traditions, the lotus flower symbolizes purification of mind, body and speech; of awakening and letting go. It embodies resilience, as rain from dark clouds slides easily off its petals and it opens itself to the sunshine that follows. In each pose we practiced mindfully observing and making peace with the darkness beneath the lotus—our fear, sadness, anger and other difficult sensations so that we could release them. We experienced the visceral lotus within our own bodies.

Embracing the muddy, murky waters of loss, failure, disappointment or other negative emotions each of us encounters in life is easier said than done. How do we cultivate our own metaphorical lotus flowers and emerge triumphantly from the darkness, you may ask? As I pondered the lotus, I was reminded of similar work I do with my coaching clients.

### **KEY TO MANAGING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS IS TO FIRST MINDFULLY OBSERVE**

Without stuffing, judging, shaming, hiding from, lashing out at, or resisting the uncomfortable moment that has presented itself, we can learn to deal with difficulties in a more productive way. A simple way to describe mindfulness is to become an “objective observer” of the present moment. This shifts us quickly from the primal, fear-focused part of our brain to the more evolved, higher brain, where the solutions can be created. This is important, because fear robs us of essential energy and clarity to solve our challenges. We can learn to focus instead on using our strengths for solutions, which promotes resilience and is energizing.

Being mindful leads to truthful, authentic living. It is the first step in transforming our negative emotions and creating a better future. When we deal honestly with our emotions, we can extend compassion to ourselves. Self-compassion requires first taking a balanced, mindful approach to our negative emotions so that our feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated. And it is from this place that learning and growth emerge.

Mindfully experiencing a negative emotion does not mean we don’t prefer, hope for, or work toward something better. It is not a passive approach to life. Rather, being mindful allows us to experience hard moments such as conflict, stress or failure—to learn and grow from these experiences—rendering them less acute and more manageable. And more, it helps us work through our afflictions so that we begin to experience the whole of life in a more productive way.

## THE “UNDOING” EFFECT OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Negative emotions are part of life. Some I call “authentic”—because they inspire positive change and lead to growth. Some I call “counterfeit”—debilitating us, resulting in useless stress and suffering. Once you have made the distinction between authentic and counterfeit, the next step in “undoing” a negative emotion is to intentionally cultivate a positive emotion to take its place. Research on the “undoing effect” of positive emotions suggests that people can improve their wellbeing by evoking positive emotions at opportune moments to cope with negative emotions. Inducing a positive emotion can loosen the hold that a negative emotion has gained on a person’s mind and body. For example, if you are feeling rejected after learning someone else got the promotion you wanted, you can cultivate the emotion (and character strength) of gratitude as you intentionally focus on other positive aspects of your life. This helps us learn to self-regulate and to bring our best selves to the forefront—strengthening our emotional health, our relationships with others, and making us more productive and content.

We can draw strength from examples of people who emerged triumphantly from the murky waters of loss and shifted their focus to what they “have” instead of what they “lost.” An inspiring example is blind architect Chris Downey. He began to lose his sight two days after surgery to remove a brain tumor, and on the third day, it was completely gone. Yet, despite the painful challenges that ensued, Downey claims he never once considered giving up his work in architecture. According to Downey, at the age of 45 waking up blind and with no sense of smell (also lost in the surgery), was “quite frankly, really terrifying.” But, when interviewed about the resulting development of his architectural skill to design buildings with much needed accommodations for the blind, he replied “I’m absolutely convinced I’m a better architect today than I was sighted.” And when asked if he could regain his sight tomorrow, would he still want to use his newfound way to “feel” the designs he creates, he replied, “There’d—be some logistical liberation to it. But will it make my life better? I don’t—I don’t think so.”

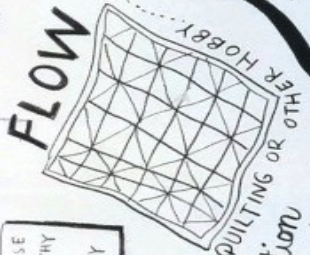
## BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience means finding meaning and purpose within life’s “losses” as well as life’s “successes.” It is the ability to bounce back and recover quickly from difficulties or challenges. It’s important to remember it is possible to cultivate gratitude and other positive emotions in the midst of tragedy.

A key ingredient in building resilience is to anchor our self-concept in the authentic strengths of character that define our uniqueness. Positive psychologists have identified twenty-four strengths — the basic building blocks that represent our individuality, psychologically speaking. We each possess all twenty-four in varying degrees and combinations. These strengths, universally valued around the world, are defined as positive traits that are beneficial to self and others. They lead us to positive emotions, relationships, and into engaging and meaningful life activities where we flourish.

Understanding your character strengths can increase your confidence in your ability to deal with any challenge that comes your way. No one can predict the future and we often create undue stress by overly focusing on and worrying about what “might happen.” While we cannot predict the future, we can choose to gratefully focus on our strengths, thus increasing our confidence and ability to deal with whatever the future brings.

SAVORING UMM...  
**ENGAGEMENT**



I AM AT EASE  
I AM HEALTHY  
I AM SAFE  
I AM HAPPY

MAXIMIZERS & SATISFICERS

CHOICE

MINDFULNESS  
HERE & NOW  
self regulation

SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY



OPTIMISM  
ABC'S & ABCDE'S

**POSITIVITY**  
Broaden & Build

FORGIVENESS

WIRE FOR NEGATIVITY  
Learner vs. Judger



AGING WELL

CROSSFIT



RITUALS

Fruits & Vegetables

OTHER PEOPLE MATTER



HERE LET ME HELP!

**RELATIONSHIPS**

laughing HA! HA! HA!



CREATIVE  
WORK AS A CALLING

AWE

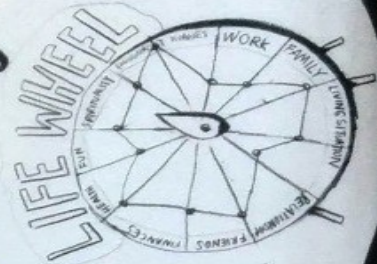
PASSION

**MEANING**

helping

Spirituality

PURPOSE



COACHING

GRIT

GOAL SETTING

HOPE

**ACHIEVEMENT**

Change the story

Basing your self-concept on your strengths builds your resilience to remain strong wherever you go and regardless of what happens to you. People like Chris Downey are examples of not only resilience, but also of post-traumatic growth. Research is showing that resilience and post-traumatic growth correspond with the following strengths:

- ⇒ Improved relationships (kindness, love)
- ⇒ Openness to new possibilities (curiosity, creativity, love of learning)
- ⇒ Appreciation of life (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, zest)
- ⇒ Personal strength (bravery, honesty, perseverance)
- ⇒ Spiritual development (spirituality)



Other research on building resilience shows that bravery is one of the character strengths most strongly associated with resilience. It was found that bravery was related to the recovery of life satisfaction after physical illness, and to posttraumatic growth. Resilience also involves the development of courage, which is defined as the capacity to move into situations when we feel fear or hesitation (i.e. bravery). People who develop bravery do not shrink from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain, and are able to face adverse situations with increased resilience.

## CONNECT, CARE, CREATE

Everyone experiences challenges and disappointments— therefore negative emotions are an unavoidable part of life. In my book, *Authentic Strengths*, I have synthesized evidence-based techniques to manage negative emotions into an easy to remember, three-step tool that I call: “Connect-Care-Create.” This tool can help you process common negative emotions associated with personal and professional disappointments, losses or failures.

First, because our brain tends to exaggerate a single event and get stuck in an endless cycle of rumination, the three-step process in the Connect-Care-Create tool begins with mindfully focusing on our body and observing the emotion, which helps stop the rumination by giving our brain something new and objective to focus on. Second, it prompts us toward self-care and self-compassion by helping us accept that negative emotions are a part of life, recognizing that we are not being “singled out”. And third, this process helps us dissolve the negative emotion by using our character strengths as a lens to address the issue, thus creating a new positive perspective/emotion to undo the effect of the negative emotion. There is evidence that negative memories and the emotions attached to them are malleable to change[8] soon after being recalled, especially within the following hour.

So, in a nutshell, here is the tool:

**Connect:** Find a quiet, safe place and get into a comfortable seated position. Relax and take a few calming breaths. Closing your eyes, “connect” by mindfully and calmly observing a negative emotion you are feeling or have felt in the past, that you feel safe exploring at this time. Notice all aspects of the emotion without judging it, shaming it, or avoiding it. Just let yourself observe it objectively, while being gentle and compassionate with yourself. Name the emotion without blaming anyone or anything, for example, “I feel anxious and fearful.” Where in your body do you feel the emotion most (your stomach, shoulders, heart, back, lungs, etc.)?

**Care:** Practice self-care. Relax the area where you are holding the negative emotion. It can be helpful to place your hand on the location of your emotion with a healing intention. With each exhalation, imagine it releasing in that area of your body, dissolving like an ice cube in warm water. Send yourself compassion, reminding yourself that everyone experiences difficult moments, loss, mistakes and failure. Reassure yourself that all will be well, that you will give yourself the support you need to get through this experience and that you will take the steps to better the situation. It's also helpful to engage in a positive ritual that releases the emotion such as talking to someone you trust who will be compassionate with you, taking a walk, practicing yoga, prayer, meditation, listening to uplifting music, reading something inspiring, writing down the emotion and throwing it away, taking a shower, etc.—whatever tends to lift your spirits.

**Create:** Recognize that you have the choice and ability to respond to this difficult emotion in creative new ways. Identify a character strength such as hope, forgiveness, perspective, bravery, creativity, kindness to self, gratitude, etc., to help you transform this negative emotion and to create a positive shift in perspective that better serves you. How can you learn and grow from this experience? What new positive emotions are you feeling now? Notice the negative emotion gradually dissipate and lose its power over you, as new positive emotions are created in its place. Celebrate this emancipating feeling by treating yourself to an enjoyable activity.

In practicing this tool, people report a sense of relief, liberation, and a freedom from rumination that opens them to real growth. The most encouraging part of this approach is that we can learn to productively process negative emotions. After all, you are the one person in your life that is always around when you are feeling negative emotions, so why not learn to deliver the best antidote?

Disclaimer: Some negative emotions, like those rooted in mental health issues, substance abuse, abusive environments, etc., are best addressed with help of a medical professional or licensed therapist. Please seek appropriate help.



#### References

Susan Fendler is owner and yoga instructor at [parkcityspayoga.com](http://parkcityspayoga.com)

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Info from: <https://www.viacharacter.org/topics/articles/no-mud-no-lotus-boosting-resilience-when-life-is-tough>