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Building Resilience

by [Martin E.P. Seligman](#)

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Douglas and Walter, two University of Pennsylvania MBA graduates, were laid off by their Wall Street companies 18 months ago. Both went into a tailspin: They were sad, listless, indecisive, and anxious about the future. For Douglas, the mood was transient. After two weeks he told himself, "It's not you; it's the economy going through a bad patch. I'm good at what I do, and there will be a market for my skills." He updated his résumé and sent it to a dozen New York firms, all of which rejected him. He then tried six companies in his Ohio hometown and eventually landed a position. Walter, by contrast, spiraled into hopelessness: "I got fired because I can't perform under pressure," he thought. "I'm not cut out for finance. The economy will take years to recover." Even as the market improved, he didn't look for another job; he ended up moving back in with his parents.

Douglas and Walter (actually composites based on interviewees) stand at opposite ends of the continuum of reactions to failure. The Douglasses of the world bounce back after a brief period of malaise; within a year they've grown because of the experience. The Walters go from sadness to depression to a paralyzing fear of the future. Yet failure is a nearly inevitable part of work; and along with dashed romance, it is one of life's most common traumas. People like Walter are almost certain to find their careers stymied, and companies full of such employees are doomed in hard times. It is people like Douglas who rise to the top, and whom organizations must recruit and retain in order to succeed. But how can you tell who is a Walter and who is a Douglas? And can Walters become Douglasses? Can resilience be measured and taught?

Thirty years of scientific research has put the answers to these questions within our reach. We have learned not only how to distinguish those who will grow after failure from those who will collapse, but also how to build the skills of people in the latter category. I have worked with colleagues from around the world to develop a program for teaching resilience. It is now being tested in an organization of 1.1 million people where trauma is more common and more severe than in any corporate setting: the U.S. Army. Its members may struggle with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but thousands of them also experience post-traumatic growth. Our goal is to

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employ resilience training to reduce the number of those who struggle and increase the number of those who grow. We believe that businesspeople can draw lessons from this approach, particularly in times of failure and stagnation. Working with both individual soldiers (employees) and drill sergeants (managers), we are helping to create an army of Douglasses who can turn their most difficult experiences into catalysts for improved performance.

Optimism Is the Key

Although I'm now called the father of positive psychology, I came to it the long, hard way, through many years of research on failure and helplessness. In the late 1960s I was part of the team that discovered "learned helplessness." We found that dogs, rats, mice, and even cockroaches that experienced mildly painful shock over which they had no control would eventually just accept it, with no attempt to escape. It was next shown that human beings do the same thing. In an experiment published in 1975 by Donald Hiroto and me and replicated many times since, subjects are randomly divided into three groups. Those in the first are exposed to an annoying loud noise that they can stop by pushing a button in front of them. Those in the second hear the same noise but can't turn it off, though they try hard. Those in the third, the control group, hear nothing at all. Later, typically the following day, the subjects are faced with a brand-new situation that again involves noise. To turn the noise off, all they have to do is move their hands about 12 inches. The people in the first and third groups figure this out and readily learn to avoid the noise. But those in the second group typically do nothing. In phase one they failed, realized they had no control, and became passive. In phase two, expecting more failure, they don't even try to escape. They have learned helplessness.

Strangely, however, about a third of the animals and people who experience inescapable shocks or noise never become helpless. What is it about them that makes this so? Over 15 years of study, my colleagues and I discovered that the answer is optimism. We developed questionnaires and analyzed the content of verbatim speech and writing to assess "explanatory style" as optimistic or pessimistic. We discovered that people who don't give up have a habit of interpreting setbacks as temporary, local, and changeable. ("It's going away quickly; it's just this one situation, and I can do something about it.") That suggested how we might immunize people against learned helplessness, against depression and anxiety, and against giving up after failure: by teaching them to think like optimists. We created the [Penn Resiliency Program](#), under the direction of Karen Reivich and Jane Gillham, of the University of Pennsylvania, for young adults and children. The program has been replicated in 21 diverse school settings—ranging from suburbs to inner cities, from Philadelphia to Beijing. We also created a 10-day program in which teachers learn techniques for becoming more optimistic in their own lives and how to teach those techniques to their students. We've found that it reduces depression and anxiety in the children under their care. (Another way we teach positive psychology is through the master of applied positive psychology, or [MAPP](#), degree program, now in its sixth year at Penn.)

In November 2008, when the legendary General George W. Casey, Jr., the army chief of staff and former commander of the multinational force in Iraq, asked me what positive psychology had to say about soldiers' problems, I offered a simple answer: How human beings react to extreme adversity is normally distributed. On one end are the people who fall apart into PTSD, depression, and even suicide. In the middle are most people, who at first react with symptoms of depression and anxiety but within a month or so are, by physical and psychological measures, back where they were before the trauma. That is resilience. On the other end are people who show post-traumatic growth. They, too, first experience depression and anxiety, often exhibiting full-blown PTSD, but within a year they are better off than they were before the trauma. These are the people of whom Friedrich Nietzsche said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

I told General Casey that the army could shift its distribution toward the growth end by teaching psychological skills to stop the downward spiral that often follows failure. He ordered the organization to measure resilience and teach positive psychology to create a force as fit psychologically as it is physically. This \$145 million initiative, under the direction of Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, is called [Comprehensive Soldier Fitness \(CSF\)](#) and consists of three components: a test for psychological fitness, self-improvement courses available following the test, and "master resilience training" (MRT) for drill sergeants. These are based on PERMA: positive emotion, engagement,




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Martin E.P. Seligman is the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book is *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (Free Press, 2011), from which this article is adapted.

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Avatar **Dr. Richard Amaral** · 5 months ago

Dr. Seligman,

Loved this post. Thank you, not only for this, but for your work in the amazing science of psychology. Your thinking, and sharing, has made a difference in the lives of many people.

Richard

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Avatar **Donna Volpitta, Ed.D.** · 9 months ago

You have done such great work, Dr. Seligman, and I often refer to it in my own. My goal is to teach people how to use everyday challenges to build resilience--using an understanding of basic neurology, psychology and education. It is amazing what a little information can do to completely change the way we look at challenges. (www.urresilient.com).

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Avatar **Dvitsaki** · a year ago

Is my comment going to be deleted? Probably it will. Teaching soldiers how to kill (isn't that their job?) without being traumatized is indeed a noble cause! Teaching corporations how to focus on more and more business regardless of the outcome is also admirable. And all these from the former president of APA! Psychologists like him make me feel ashamed to reveal my job

2 ▲ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

Avatar **PERMA** > Dvitsaki · 9 months ago

You are making a huge jump from offering resilience training to soldiers, who often experience debilitating PTSD post-service to "teaching them how to kill without being traumatized". Kill or no kill, you'll agree that service itself is a very traumatic, unfortunate, although necessary profession (somebody has got to do it). That being said, rather than admitting your hatred towards the profession, you are projecting your hatred onto a discipline (positive psychology) that is trying to work with the system, helping where it can be helped. You'll do better in the future not to make ignorant assumptions and jumping to conclusions. In the mean time, please, if you are going to comment, take the time to understand the scope of Positive Psychology as a discipline.

2 ▲ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

Avatar **Gary** > PERMA · 5 months ago

This communication is hard to read for me.

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Avatar **Tonycasey** · a year ago

Great work I want to get more info on this.

Cheers

Tony Casey

Capt

Irish D F

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