

Resilience, healing and pain: How can I get through my injury and be better for it?

It takes a moment to get an injury. Healing takes whatever time it requires. That's the stark reality. And all the good stuff happens in the middle. The element of surprise seems a common thread throughout our lives. And yet we hate surprises, most of us. Change being the most difficult thing we manage. So how do we cope with life? We make meaning from the stories we tell ourselves. Consciously and unconsciously we strive to shape our stories around a general theme. The themes we choose say a lot about us as individuals. Bad luck, good luck, deeper spiritual messages, familial histories, whether we fall or rise is defined by our belief. In other words, our glass is half full or half empty of whatever interpretation we choose. So when it happens, life- I mean in the "man plans, God laughs" version- we each have a defining moment. How do we tell our story?

Here's where science enters the scene. Scientists have measured various components of healing. Social scientists have measured components of resilience. Studies show people with resilient qualities physically heal faster and better. Lucky for us, resilience can be taught and learned.

So what makes up resilience and how can you be more resilient during difficult times? For starters we'll look at "cognitive hardiness" (staying mentally strong). When cognitive hardiness is present daily life changes and events are experienced as challenging rather than threatening. Kind of like looking at a wave and imagining bodysurfing it instead of being pummeled by it. This keeps you solution focused and open to trying new experiences, looking for possibilities even if they aren't readily apparent.

Here are two things you can do to boost your cognitive hardiness and improve your ability to deal with change: 1) Make a commitment to work, family, a hobby or projects on a day-to-day basis, giving you things to look forward to doing. This can include physical therapy and doing prescribed healing exercises on your own; 2) Nurture the belief that you have a strong influence over your life, that what you do has an effect on what you can achieve. This gives you a much needed feeling of control in a situation, like healing an injury, when you can feel powerless. It may even influence you to try an alternative solution, like acupuncture or reiki, to see if this adjunctive therapy can help?

This positive mindset can help buffer the damaging impact of stress on well-being and directly generate more effective coping behaviors. Individuals who score high on cognitive hardiness tend to cope with stress by direct problem-solving rather than by avoiding or ignoring a situation. They also tend to interact with others by giving and getting assistance and encouragement rather than by striking out or being overprotective, all important factors in healing. During illness or injury we are confronted by our own coping style and this is the time and opportunity to make needed adjustments and grow.

Social support is another well-studied and important factor in healing. We need each other in ways we don't even understand. Our support systems directly and indirectly influence our longevity and well-being. Support can help manage stress by enabling us to

see our situation through other eyes or by receiving empathy. This can be from our doctor, physical therapist, medical professionals, trusted friends, family and loved ones. Here are things you can do to effectively use your social support system: 1) Have frequent daily contact with others; 2) Express your feelings; 3) Have a confidant. These things directly enhance psychological well-being, mood, confidence and quality of life, especially in times of illness or injury. Merely having someone in the house is not enough. Proximity does not equal intimacy. Even small, focused amounts of time given to another can provide much needed connection, which speeds healing and helps to decrease perception of pain.

Coping style is how you deal with work and life pressures and challenges. Your coping style determines whether you feel overwhelmed at each change coming your way or confidently feel “I got this,” knowing you can reach out for help if you need it. Positive appraisal (optimism) is defined as focusing on the positive to minimize what appear to be problems, pressures or challenges. You can do this by saying or thinking positive things about your situation. This can prove particularly challenging when you’re in pain or dealing with the unknowns of recovery. At these moments, I believe it is crucial to lead with a positive mental attitude if only for the reason that it boosts your immune system function; therefore, it can only help. Conversely, negative appraisal (pessimism) is well documented to decrease immune system function, increase perception of pain and leads to a more negative spiral of coping mechanisms, such as isolation. Many studies have shown that isolation and negativity interfere with healing. Furthermore, optimism has been shown to minimize perception of pain and lead to quicker healing. Biochemically speaking, you are releasing oxytocin and endorphins into the bloodstream, creating a feeling of well-being. A strong negative response of feeling overwhelmed signals the release of cortisol and adrenaline, which creates anything from anxiety to depression to tense muscles and increased perception of pain.

When you “make a molehill out of a mountain” you are using another factor of resilience called threat minimization. Knowing you can find answers or asking for help allows you to have a little control over some element of your healing. Minimizing challenges through humor can assist with releasing endorphins, the body’s natural antidote to pain.

Health habits are another element of recovery that cannot be overstated. Exercise, physical therapy, good sleep as well as daily relaxation, eating good nutrition, limiting alcohol and eliminating cigarettes are key.

There are many varied challenges to healing an injury and to practicing resilience. They include caregivers, the medical system, insurance coverage and billing, transportation, doctors and lack of information. Depression is a biochemical response that can be a normal part of healing. Especially with the passage of time and little relief from symptoms, the body may naturally conserve energy normally going to brain function to nurture vital organs or heal the injury. The result can be a biochemical depression that will pass. Understanding this is a normal phase of recovery is vital. If the feeling of being overwhelmed or depressed lasts more than six months, you may want to seek professional help.

When looking to make meaning from an injury, patients can be encouraged to “walk gracefully through the fire” by learning and practicing key elements of resilience. This enables them to participate in their recovery and to gain valuable life skills.

Remembering to stay positive more often than not, to disengage conflict as quickly as possible and focus on solutions rather than challenges can offer much needed hope and a feeling of control. These factors lead to a more successful healing experience and recovery.

About the author

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