

In Search of Harmony: Becoming Your Own Hero at Work

Copyright © 2002 by Vivian Ellis Zabriskie

Chapter 9

Resiliency Strategies: Coping with Stress/Avoiding Despair

*Hey,
this little kid gets roller skates,
She puts them on,
She stands up and almost
flops over backwards.
She sticks out a foot like
she's going somewhere and
falls down and
smacks her hand. She
grabs hold of a step to get up
and sticks out the other foot and
slides about six inches and
falls and skins her knee.
And then, you know what?
She brushes off the dirt and the blood and
puts some spit on it and then
sticks out the other foot again.*

—Myra Cohn Livingston

Much of an organization's emphasis is upon control and stability when in reality our personal focus should be on *resiliency*. We need new ways to brush off the dirt and blood, put some spit on our boo boos, and stick out the other foot again.

In today's workplaces the unpredictable nature of organizational life creates anxiety so intense that productive work is often impossible. The fallout at home is even worse. Work warriors wear stress like battle armor, believing the more they can handle the better protected they are from clear and present danger. Stress reduction is one of the fastest growing industries in the U.S. From workshops to day spa retreats, nearly everyone is seeking "Zen on the go," often attacking stress reduction with the same intensity as they do working.

Work is everywhere: from the freeway to the fairway, everyone has a cell phone stuck to his or her ear. Television commercials of mothers in bathing suits take the office with them, embarrassed by the squeals of excitement from their toddler and exclaiming, “Listen up, everybody! It’s a meeting!” For vacationers, lap-tops are as essential as the suntan lotion. At home, work, and play, workers are drowning in messages. According to a survey of workers in the United States, Britain, and Canada by the Pitney Bowes Company and the Institute of the Future, the average office worker is bombarded by 169 telephone, e-mail, voice mail, postal, and other communications every working day. More than a third of the executives in all three countries described themselves as “overwhelmed” by the number of messages they receive. Almost half of all executives and managers complained they regularly receive messages saying the same thing.¹ Everybody’s connected, everybody’s talking, but nobody’s listening. Disconnection is a way of life, from ourselves and each other. Many people have lost their ability to feel good, at least in legitimate ways. Instead, they experience

- **chronic fatigue**, usually accompanied by patterns of sleep deprivation;
- **conflicted feelings**, torn between work and family responsibilities and time for themselves;
- **constricted muscles**, stiffness in the neck, upper shoulders, chest, or back;
- **inadequacy and powerlessness**, too much to do in too little time; striving to keep up, yet without much control to change things;
- **inordinate need to control**, trying (with little success) to micromanage everything and everyone to get on top of things;
- **entrapment**, feeling boxed in by duty and dreams unfulfilled;
- **striving** to get more toys to fill the void;
- **excessive use of drugs and alcohol**;
- **road rage**;
- **free-floating anxiety from threats of terrorism and corporate surprises.**

The toll of the new reality of living with terrorism, lack of trust, feeling disconnected, and of having little separation from one’s work life and home life is worse than you think. The effects of stress are even more profound than imagined. Consider the following findings:

It [stress] penetrates to the core of our being. Stress is not something that just grips us and, with time and effort, then lets go. It changes us in the process. It alters our bodies—and our brains.

We may respond to stress as we do an allergy. That is, we can become sensitized, or acutely sensitive, to stress. Once that happens, even the merest intimation of stress can trigger a cascade of chemical reactions in brain and body that assault us from

within. Stress is the psychological equivalent of ragweed. Once the body becomes sensitized to pollen or ragweed, it takes only the slightest bloom in spring or fall to set off the biochemical alarm that results in runny noses, watery eyes, and the general misery of hay fever. But while only some of us are genetically programmed to be plagued with hay fever, all of us have the capacity to become sensitized to stress.²

According to psychologist Michael Meaney, of McGill University, “What happens is that sensitization leads the brain to re-circuit itself in response to stress. We know that what we are encountering may be a normal, everyday episode of stress, but the brain is signaling the body to respond inappropriately.”³ In other words, our brain treats a normal everyday thing like running late for an appointment like a life-and-death situation. The experience of stress in the past magnifies our response to stress in the future.

Although in our conscious mind the threat of danger is small, our body chemistry continues to run amok, inducing automatic fight and flight responses that are out of sync with reality. Wearing more stress like a badge of honor lowers our stress thermostat’s set point, says Jonathan C. Smith, founder and director of the Stress Institute at Roosevelt University in Chicago. The *habit* of stress causes our bodies to produce either too many excitatory chemicals or too few calming ones.

Researchers also say the exposure to stress during developmental periods is more damaging than in later years. Indeed, inordinate stress occurring when we are young “may permanently rewire the brain’s circuitry . . . leaving it less able to handle normal, everyday stress.”⁴ This finding confirms the impact of *biological* as well as psychological factors related to coping styles in childhood and their impact on coping strategies in adult life. What on the surface may look “inappropriate” is in fact extremely appropriate considering the history of the individual.

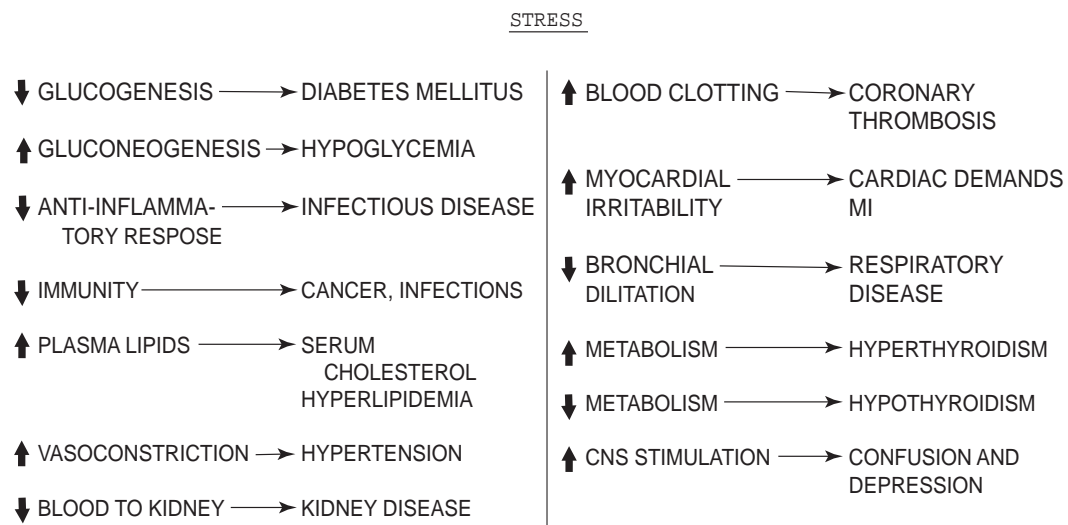
Stress tolerance is not so easily chalked up to just improving one’s attitude. In many cases, stress tolerance has less to do with trying harder and more to do with understanding and adapting to the environmental influences of our past. The following story illustrates the powerful pull of the past on current situations:

A few years after I was married, my wife posed a puzzling question, “Why do you become more irritable and paranoid around 6 PM every day?” I had no idea, but the observation was true—I definitely felt more stress, tension and hostility around dinner time. It was not due to my wife or children, whose behavior remained fairly consistent throughout the day, it was something in me. Finding nothing to account for these mood swings in my present, I turned to my past, and the light bulb came on. 6 PM was when my father came home. A principled man in an unprincipled department of state government, he put up with a lot of garbage at work and vented

his frustrations on his family every night. He would blow up and rant and rave at his kids at the slightest provocation. I would yell right back. Years later, I was still preparing for battle, even though I was the only one at war.

When the body's defense mechanisms react with inaccurate discernment about the *real* level of clear and present danger, and when the norm in our work life is to consistently push us to higher levels of stress tolerance, the body slowly kills itself. The stress chips away at our immune system, making us vulnerable to life-threatening illnesses. Excessive stress is "slow poison" continually dripping into the body. Hormones released in the body by stress increase the likelihood of heart disease, stroke, cancer, infections, and diseases of the digestive system. Virtually all systems of the body are at risk from too much stress.⁵

STRESS RESPONSE



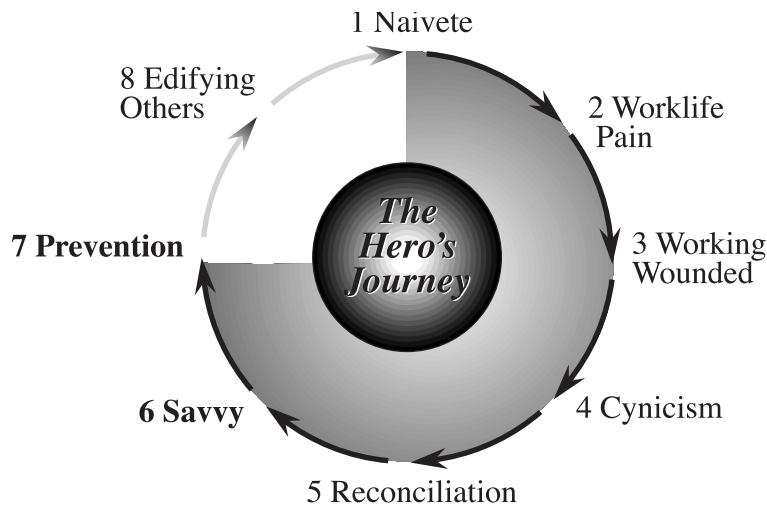
Stress physically alters us. Over fourteen hundred changes may occur during the stress reaction, all within an eight-second period. A study by the American Psychiatric Association shows that victims of child abuse are placed even more at risk. Their study shows that the hippocampus of victims of sexual abuse is smaller than normal. This tiny structure in the brain is partially responsible for storing short-term memory and is activated by the same hormones released during stress. We know that stress alters the serotonin pathways in the brain, thus linking the effects of stress on depression and aggression.⁶

We all begin the job of managing stress as amateurs. When we consider the staggering statistics in chapter 3 regarding the levels of trauma and abuse in our society, it is imperative we change the way

we deal with stress and its aftermath. To manage stress productively, we need resiliency strategies for managing the mind, managing the body, managing the environment, and managing the spirit (if this isn't an oxymoron). We have a much greater potential for success with the mind, body, and spirit than with the environment.

Resiliency Strategies: Managing the Mind

Our ability to respond to stress without injury is as unique as our fingerprints. There is no “one size-fits-all.” This established, we can get on with the business of developing our skills of coping with and preventing stress before it becomes overwhelming. We place the emphasis up front on self-awareness about the principles of wholeness. We learn about our own particular stress threshold and understand our own individual symptoms of stress. We develop an array of stress-stoppers before stress happens.



When we fail to recognize and respond to the stressors in our lives until we're already over the line, the damage to our bodies has already occurred. But, for many people who have lived a lifetime stressed out, the normal cuing mechanisms that warn us to set better boundaries just do not exist. Also, stress hormones or drug and alcohol use may have numbed our ability to feel good, to feel pleasure naturally. The world we live in as adults has changed—we have more power, more freedom to define or redefine our lives. However, there are many obstacles to initiative and stability. To discover or recover balanced judgment it is difficult when we are addicted to adrenalin rushes to keep going, when we have no memories of wholeness, or distorted memories about who we really

are. The error in our judgment is that regular, routine measures should suffice when only extraordinary ones will do.

Up to this point in my life, I am one who has needed extraordinary measures to restore balanced judgment. I'm a peak and valley person. I tend to work intensely and feverishly often to the point of burnout, followed by a period of recovery. These life rhythms are both a great blessing and curse. During peak periods, my enthusiasm and creativity propel me up the tallest mountain. Forgetting to nurture and pace myself, frustrated and discouraged, I'm convinced I'll never get to the top. Never. Feeling defeated, I plunge into discouragement or despair, work like crazy to recover, and start up the mountain again.

I have been thus "afflicted" since I can remember, driving myself and others a little loony in the process. Even as a young child, "You don't know when to quit," was the criticism of choice from my family. Thank goodness I *didn't*! This attribute was the very thing that helped me survive the difficulties of my childhood. This blessing and curse continues to threaten my well-being in adulthood. Survival strategies became a habit, so deeply entrenched into my personality I have difficulty "remembering" to live without striving. In each phase, I forget another phase is coming just around the bend. I believe whatever way I am feeling is as permanent as the spots on Miss Janie's famous tabby cat. Many of us, without a conscious intervention, become imprisoned by our brain circuitry.

Ironically, because of the stress involved in writing this book, I'm finally getting it. I'm becoming more savvy about the impact of my life script on my personal adventure to become my own hero in my new job as a writer. My survivor's pride that pushed me to leap tall buildings is no longer appropriate. My body is telling me, "I'm out of here; you can stay if you want, but you can't drag me with you any more." I'm learning to pace myself and to anticipate in advance the stressors that pull me to extremes.

Here are a few things I have learned on my journey to "enduring well" the roller-coaster patterns of my life:



Less is more.

Sometimes, more really *is* more, like more tolerance, more patience, more forgiveness, more humility, more love, and more courage. However, even in the arena of goodness, *less is more* a good portion of the time when it comes to coping with stress—less expectation of perfection as an immediate end state. The true definition of perfection is doing the best we can and relying upon grace to cover the difference. As works in progress our time frame is infinite. Accepting the “down phases”—the trials—the times when things aren’t going well—is just as important as times of happiness and prosperity. The great Mormon pioneer leader Brigham Young, emphasized the attribute of gratitude *especially* during trials:

I rejoice because I am afflicted. I rejoice because I am poor. I rejoice because I am cast down. Why? Because I shall be lifted up again. I rejoice that I am poor because I shall be made rich; that I am afflicted, because I shall be comforted, and prepared to enjoy the felicity of perfect happiness, for it is impossible to properly appreciate happiness except by enduring the opposite.⁷

In *The Pleasure Prescription*, psychologist Paul Pearsall reports anecdotal and scientific evidence of the power of the philosophy of “moment to moment joy” through the variations of life. He tells of watching a young Hawaiian woman crying while she danced the hula:

She smiled and swayed gracefully to the gentle chanting and music, but teardrops slid down her cheek and moistened the floral lei around her neck. After her dance, I said, “You did such a beautiful dance today. You moved so wonderfully even though you seem sad.” She smiled, wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and said, “I am very sad. I have just learned that I have a tumor in my breast. This is the best time to dance. Dancing is easy when you are happy, but it is healing and necessary when you are hurt. Life is a hula, and you must learn to love and share the hula no matter what life has given you. Hula helps me keep the harmony in my life even when the music nature plays for me is not pretty. When you hula, you always move both right and left. Right is no more important than left. Your hula is a way of being in *pono* (balance) and staying in *pololei* (connection.)⁸

Less is more when we claim the spiritual value of our wounds and the *process* of becoming: heightened awareness, deeper discernment, enveloping empathy, real resiliency, untapped sources of power, a tenacity for living well *in spite of*. Maybe even *because of*. From the road of trials, we learn to appreciate the authority of our own life experiences as the criterion for everlasting progression. It’s not how high you climb; it’s the distance you cover.

From Pearsall’s work in the new field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and psychoneurocardiology (PNC), we learn that the brain is hardwired for balance, living in neither polarity as a norm. Indeed, we can influence the mood states by how we respond to them. Pearsall writes:

Emotions do not just happen to us. We don't feel joy simply because something good happens to us and joyful signals are sent to our brain. We don't just smile because we are happy. We also feel happy because we smile. You may be surprised to know that we can influence our own emotional state. One of the most important things you can do to bring more pleasure into your life is to act joyful. As Shakespeare said, "The play's the thing."

. . . We are made not to feel too much depression or too much happiness for too long. Blissful pleasure comes from being aware of both sides of our emotional self and realizing that life is neither a bowl of cherries nor lemons. . . . We are made to "emotionally rebound" from whatever emotional state we are in.⁹

Redefining riding the "roller coaster" within the positive terms of "emotional rebounding" takes some of the stress out of life at work. Being open to the constant changing of the colors of life at work is not only a necessity, it is in fact something we should look forward to?! According to *opponent process theory*, our brain has an "emotional thermostat": nothing that happens to us is one-sided. According to Pearsall,

The pleasure system pendulum starts to swing when we respond to something in our environment. An opposing emotion always begins sometime after the onset of the original emotion. This is good news for the chronic pessimist and bad news for those who constantly strive to be optimistic.

Opponent process theory also says that the second rebound emotion lasts longer than the first emotion. So if you have been very sad for a long time, you can count on being even happier for a longer time. If you seek to stay happy and be high most of the time, however, you are in line for the emotional boomerang to come back in full force to knock you down. Another aspect of the emotional rebound theory is that if we experience the first emotion on repeated occasions, the opposing emotion grows even stronger. Getting too high too often means you will get very, very low more often.¹⁰

Again, balance is the key to managing emotional rebound. Being gentle with ourselves—finding peace in empty spaces—puts a seal of approval on the workings of Deity and helps us to let go of our finite judgment replaced by infinite wisdom.



Regard alienation as a plus.

In *The Resilient Self*,¹¹ Steven and Sybil Wolin’s study of how survivors of troubled families rise above adversity, successful survivors believe that being different from others in the family is a good thing. The greater the distance, the less susceptible they are to having the same problems. This attitude is also helpful when swimming against the tide of public opinion and political correctness at work. The natural inclination is to belong, to fit in, to not make waves. However, when those waves are drowning us in a sea of unrelenting stress, if we are to be true to our values and true nature, we have little choice but to accept estrangement with grace and healthy pride. We choose to believe there is something *right* with us, not something *wrong*. This approach helps us *maintain calm*, another resiliency strategy employed by survivors of adversity. By reacting less to the strange and unsettling behavior of others and by capitalizing on the knowledge that the rejection and criticism are not their fault, survivors can reduce the damage to themselves.

The goal is “enlightened alienation.” Once again, we can go too far; the goal is finding a healthy balance:

conformity	⇒	independence	⇒	rebellion
social norm	⇒	acceptable idiosyncrasy	⇒	disruptive iconoclast
reactionary	⇒	activist	⇒	radical

Adopting a *healthy* rejection of behaviors that pull us away from our true values and our true purpose in life also includes rejecting the mantra of the masses: Be it all! *Never* be less than you can be; otherwise, you’re cheated of that to which you are “entitled!” Entitled by whom? When? Why? Pearsall reminds us again of the illusionary qualities of believing things should be one way when they are another. We’re entitled to nothing except what God sees fit to bestow upon us in his own time and way. You only have to get on the freeway to understand the stranglehold impatience has upon our lives. Too much concern with striving to live a “better” life, not just a good life, institutionalizes impatience as a way of life at work and at home. Pearsall writes,

Impatience robs us of a gentle and forgiving life, and often takes the form of Toxic Success Syndrome, which can develop slowly . . . or immediately. Ironically,

impatience is considered a virtue, and thus highly rewarded by our culture. Many of the greatest authors, poets, and leaders have been driven by an internal intolerance of being less than their very best and a chronic struggle to be better. Spiritual impatience tells these people that they are not becoming wise enough fast enough. Socialized impatience leads to constant nagging comparisons with others and concern for what others think and appear to have. In both cases, these people are chasing an illusion of perfection.¹²

Within the context of *less is more*, going against the popular pull to strive more reduces stress and gives us more in the long run.



Stay real, but don't forget the awe.

Resilient survivors protect themselves from ongoing disappointments by giving up futile, self-defeating hopes for approval, for success, for love from dead-end sources. When we anchor hope to others, we live in our losses; we wait for rescue or release from what hurts us. It's best to attach the "hope-springs-eternal" attitude to the mysterious unfolding of our own lives, its own power, God's power to invoke the harvest in His own due time and ways.

In *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Rachel Naomi Remen's book of stories that heal, Remen captures this theme in almost every story of people's experiences in the healing process. She advises us to face reality squarely, but leave an openness to the unexpected possibilities bigger than any imagination, logic, or science. In one of her stories, she admonishes us to take our labels and even the opinions of our experts far more lightly. She tells the story of a farmer who experienced a spontaneous remission of cancer despite a grim prognosis. The researcher on the case felt the farmer's positive outcome related to his attitude. "He didn't take it on," she said. It wasn't that he denied the cancer. He just took the same attitude toward the physician's diagnosis as he took toward the predictions of the government soil experts who analyzed his fields. He respected them and listened as they showed him the findings of their tests that told him the corn would not grow in a particular spot. The farmer valued their opinions, but replied, "A lot of the time the corn grows anyway."

Attempting to get closure by facing reality brings comfort and security when we encounter grim predictions. However, the farmer's attitude reminds us of our own and other's fallibility in making forecasts. Remen writes, "Life never comes to a closure, life is a process, even mystery. Life is known only by those who have found a way to be comfortable with change and the unknown. Given the nature of life, there may be no security, but only adventure."¹³



Savor the moments, orient toward the future.

The adventure of mining our lives for the everyday treasures that lie hidden from view brings an orientation of humility, gratitude, and honesty with ourselves and others. An orientation of wholeness and integrity in the moment releases the stress of caring too much about what the world thinks. If we magnify the moments, we automatically avoid obsessing about the future. It's not one day at a time, but one moment at a time. However, sometimes what the world brings and thinks is just so disturbing we must place our trust in the mystery of better times coming. Ann Landers wrote,

If I were asked to give what I consider the single most useful bit of advice for all humanity, it would be this: Expect trouble as an inevitable part of life, and when it comes, hold your head high, look it squarely in the eye and say, "I will be bigger than you. You cannot defeat me." Then repeat to yourself the most comforting of all words, "This too shall pass."¹⁴

Placing some time limits on stressful situations gives us the capacity to endure a little while longer, until the season changes. Remember, the seasons always change. Author and columnist Claire Rayner wrote that the phrase, "This too shall pass" should be used at *all* times in your life. She said, "When things are spectacularly dreadful; when things are absolutely appalling; when everything is superb and wonderful and marvelous and happy—say these words to yourself. They will give you a sense of perspective and help you also to make the most of what is good and be stoical about what is bad."¹⁵



Faith precedes the miracle.

Believing in things hoped for but not seen—gratefully accepting the evidence of things not seen but true—expands our minds, enlarges the soul, increases our capacity to endure well. Exercising faith reduces stress. Our fear of the future holds us hostage—our beliefs that we won't be able to handle what might come our way make us feel fragile and powerless. We feel like victims. Yet, fear and

faith cannot exist in the same person at the same time. Heroes at work believe, “We are all more than we seem; we are all more than we know.”

The use of faith as a resiliency strategy should not be confused with faith as a test of spiritual worthiness to enter the kingdom of God. Instead, it is a *way of being*. In *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood*, therapist Dr. Wayne Muller, describes faith as

a spiritual practice, a way of discovering what is reliable and true, a way of expanding trust in our inner wisdom. It is a place inside where we are in a compassionate relationship with what is strong and whole within ourselves, where we listen to the still, small voices of our heart and soul. When we are practicing a path of faith, we are in intimate conversation with what is deepest in our mind, heart, and spirit.¹⁶

He calls the practice of faith a “centering response . . . a search for our true nature.” For many, faith is found in trusting the watchful love of God for all of his children. Despite circumstances, they believe the prophecies of Isaiah: God “shall renew their strength, they shall mount up on wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” In the Buddhist tradition, we cultivate equanimity, the quality of being calm and even-tempered, and we are therefore able to withstand the assaults upon our humanity without being overcome by fear. The focus is upon exercising strength and courage to endure well whatever may come. It does not mean that if we exercise enough faith the problems will go away or that God will necessarily rescue us (though He might). Muller says,

The real question of faith is when pain and loss inevitably come our way, do we withdraw in fear that we will be destroyed, or do we deepen our trust in our innate capacity to endure them?¹⁷

In our fear and our distress, we want it to be the other way around—the harvest before the planting. However we must continue on the road of trials, doing the difficult things required *before* being blessed. In faith we plant the seed of hope, an act of love for ourselves or others, we nurture and wait for the miracle of blossoming.

It sometimes helps to face our fears about the future by looking back to see what we have overcome in the past. Sometimes we are so frozen by concerns about what we think could happen in the future that we forget entirely what we have already conquered. Imagine there is a doorknob to your past difficulties in your life. On the other side of the door awaits answers to the adversity you now face. Reach out and open the door. Revisit the road of trials you have already overcome. Review

your career or personal betrayals and how you overcame them. Claim your victories! Your faith has helped you thus far; it will continue to serve you on your journey.



Nurture the seeds of hope in body, mind, and spirit.

Like a seed, your body, mind, and spirit require constant nourishment. We think we are invincible, don't need replenishing, hardy enough to withstand what may come. But at what price?

Self-nurturing requires abandoning checklist living, attaching to genuineness and depth in life in all its particulars—fulfilling work, good food, optimal health, satisfying relationships with ourselves and others and God. We *revere* life in all its capacities, anchored in the knowledge that the prescriptions of our own soul are just good enough. Putting a “halo of holiness” around our lives is perhaps the best strategy for developing resiliency and reducing stress.

Have you noticed how all of the things of life impact each other? For example, it's much easier to stick a donut in our mouths if we haven't exercised that day. Or, how drinking our eight glasses of water is a cue to eating healthy? The whole *is* more than the sum of its parts. Synergy, joint work to the common end of wholeness, leverages us to higher ground. We grow in self-discipline, wisdom, the capacity to endure, and to love well.

Adopt positive rituals that nurture and evoke reverence. These are rituals I call “nurturing currency,” little things that make us feel honored, respected, valuable, and worthy. What is nurturing for one isn't necessarily nurturing for another. For me, it's walking in my garden and greeting what is new today, walking and experiencing the beauties of nature, bringing flowers inside, praying, reading the scriptures, making popcorn, going to the movies, and treating myself to a massage and meditation rituals in the tub. Sometimes I put a mint on my pillow. And always, good music replenishes and heals me. Let others know what your nurturing currency is so they may support your efforts, and learn what their nurturing currency is so that you may reciprocate.

Research shows that *sipping* “from our internal fountain of bliss” is more effective than binging on our endorphins. Dr. Pearsall writes about Edward Diener's studies that show healthy pleasure comes from “brief, moderate, and regular joy rather than irregular intense highs.” When Diener measured mood states in men and women over a six-month period, the results clearly showed it was

not how *very* happy but how *often* a person was a *little* happy that led to the greatest sense of well-being.¹⁸

Do what calms you best and spread it out throughout the day. At a very minimum, set aside at least 20 to 30 minutes to do whatever you want—even nothing.

Self-nurturing is particularly difficult for Type A personalities who are more stressed by leisure than by work. Type A personalities are generally aggressive, hyper-alert, over-reactive, thrive on deadlines and competition, restless, and eat, walk, and talk fast. Studies show they consume more sugar and caffeine than Type B's. They are more prone to illness, and Type A's are nearly twice as vulnerable to heart attacks. Although Type A's comprise only about 20 percent of the adult population, they account for around 80 percent of all heart disease. In the book *Type A Behavior and Your Health*, Drs. Friedman and Rosenman say that it is a common trap for Type A's to attribute their success to hard work. In fact, their overly aggressive behavior *limits* their potential success and is counterproductive. Type A's may succeed, but many times it's *in spite* of their behavior, not because of it. We often confuse *activity* with *productivity*.



Put stressors in proper perspective.

Stress experts have identified the following major sources of stress:

1. Professional work stress
2. Overcrowding
3. Time
4. Noise
5. Finances
6. Marriage
7. Social
8. Family
9. Self-focus
10. Technology (Especially computers!)

Now we must add to this list the threats of terrorism. Since the lines have blurred among these major areas of stress, it becomes more difficult to sort out where the stress is really coming from.

Restoring balance requires allocating time to decipher the origin of our stress and to find solutions to our problems. Yet, not having enough time is a source of the stress in the first place! Remember the principle of *less is more*: take time to establish priorities, to “begin with the end in mind,” to decide what is most important, and to replenish. This requires the sacrifice of time in the short term for more balance and harmony in the end. Also, take constructive steps to understand your own sensitivity to stress. Has something gone wrong with the control mechanisms in the brain that is causing you to react to a traffic jam like a death in the family? If so, it is up to you to reprogram your life and to expand your resiliency strategies—to prevent stress and to be more aware of what is a real threat. To understand your personal sensitivities to stress and to adopt other strategies for coping with stress productively, contemplate deeply if you need to do the following:

- **Change the stressor.** For example, can you alter the situation in some way that makes more sense? How much control do you have over the situation? Have you expressed your concerns to others in mutual terms? What are your options? Are there circumstances in your past that predispose you to stress that require adjusting your boundaries?
- **Change your attitude.** How important is the issue to the overall goals of your life? Will it matter one year from now? Are your coping patterns of the past in sync with the adult realities of your life? Can you find the irony of the situation that gives comic relief? Are there paradoxes to consider? Make a conscious choice to care less for the moment.
- **Positively procrastinate.** Consciously decide to delay what you are stressing out over. Put it on the back burner for a while. By sequencing and prioritizing, we put things in perspective. Will the world cave in if you decide to give it a rest!?
- **Eliminate the stressor.** Can you close the door, walk away, say good-bye altogether to the problem? Is it time to move on, to take a new or higher road? Has enough become enough? Do you need this anymore? Can you just let it go? Are your choices creating what you don't want?
- **Discipline your response.** If the only way out is through, develop the strengths you need to manage the stress, instead of merely reacting and allowing the stress to manage you. Over time, this discipline can become a real source of strength, and, correspondingly, the stress may diminish into a mere annoyance.

The practice of asking ourselves these questions helps us focus on our ability to choose our responses to what is going on in our lives. Reaction to circumstances loosens its grip. In the words of Emerson, “What lies before us, and what lies behind us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

In *The Pleasure Prescription*, Pearsall gives several suggestions to help boost your pleasurable work score:

- **Work to live, but never live to work.** Pearsall says, “When your job becomes the sole purpose of your life, it is only a matter of time before your life will have no purpose.” Work is only *essential* to life not the *reason* for it. Work is a means to an end—having time to love and serve.
- **Your job isn’t yours—it is ours.** Work collaboratively to avoid assuming too much responsibility and too little control.
- **Don’t work at your job—enjoy your job’s purpose.** Remember why you are working. Look at the positive outcomes in at least one ecological way that builds or preserves natural laws in some way. How does your job make the world a better place to live?
- **Define and describe your work by its purpose, not its task.** Resist labels that set you apart from others.
- **Work gently, not hard.** Pearsall says, “If you are working hard at your job, your job is working hard on you.”¹⁹ Obviously, there are periods requiring intense efforts. The point is to integrate respite that helps pull you back to balance.



Take time to “make mine meditation”.

The noise of competing demands robs us of the continuing inspiration and revelation waiting to unfold to our consciousness. We often pray, study scriptures, or just think about our lives hoping we can get more of what we don’t have. Yet, instead of using these times to relinquish our desires, these are often times of more “striving” about our attachments—things that we wish were different. It’s a good thing to ask for divine intervention. It is equally important to let go of our

attachments, to abdicate our pride and arrogance to higher holier ends. When we humbly denounce the domination of the big I within, *we* are changed, if not the world in which we live.

Relaxation and meditation techniques practiced for thousands of years by people of various cultures and traditions are additional forms of calming the mind to achieve this end. Incorporate some of them into your daily routine, for example:

- **Breathing exercises.** One of the simplest and most powerful natural methods of controlling excessive stress is breathing. The rate and rhythm of your respiration not only *reflect* your physical and emotional state, but also *create* or change it. You can consciously control your breathing to induce deep relaxation and counteract excessive stress.

Studies conducted at New York University Medical Center show that slow, deep breathers are typically strong, steadfast, and adventurous in character. They are intellectually and physically active, and in control of their lives. Conversely, shallow breathers tend toward shyness, even fearfulness, and depend on others for a sense of security. Such findings suggest that respiration and personality are located in similar areas of the brain.

During deep breathing there are more predominate alpha brain wave patterns. The alpha brain wave cycles are associated with a conscious, creative state in relaxation and meditation. During shallow breathing, the alpha patterns decrease. Other research shows that deep breathing affects the intensity of feelings, reducing or numbing certain feelings by holding the breath briefly. Also, it is well documented that we can control heart rate by controlling the breathing rate. Our breath is the link between the body, mind, and spirit—between the conscious and unconscious mind. In *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*, Dr. Andrew Weil calls the breath the “master key to the control of emotions and to the operations of the involuntary nervous system. Moreover, breath represents the movement of spirit in matter. Turning your attention to your breath moves you naturally toward relaxation and meditation and puts you in conscious touch with your vital, nonphysical essence.”²⁰

Dr. Weil suggests you begin first by just observing the breath for about five minutes per day, gradually increasing to fifteen minutes. Try this exercise: Sit in a comfortable position, back straight, eyes closed, any tight clothing loosened. Start by just following the breath; pay attention to the natural rhythm without trying to change it. Let the breath go where it goes without interference.

Find sanctuary in the breath of life; it is always with you, sustaining, nourishing. It is a healing balm to the soul.

You may wish to experiment with a variety of breathing techniques. My favorite ritual is to fill the tub with very hot water, put on healing, comforting music, light a candle and practice my “DNA” chain imagery with breathing exercises. I imagine the spirals of my “moving toward the middle” model opening all the way up to the heavens, connecting me to God.



Try it:

Slowly inhale the breath of God through the nose, and exhale through the mouth any distress you feel. As you exhale, make a small sound like the wind, imagining the breath is wind blowing your concerns away. After a few minutes of this, center yourself: mental image opening your heart and mind to God to receive whatever revelation you need for healing and wholeness. Mental image the DNA spirals connecting you to your fellow man, past, present, and future. All of your ancestors are watching over you, encouraging, helping, caring for you, and you are grateful. Continuing the breathing exercise, feel the unity with significant others and extend the feeling to the community, present and future, in an unbroken never-ending chain. Say, “We are all connected in our pain and our joy.”

As the saying goes, “The heart is more than a pump; it is more than a valentine.” It’s a way of connecting to ourselves as prerequisite to connecting to others. Ask your heart what it is feeling and it will tell you. Ask your heart what you should do, and you will know.

You may not feel the need for such extraordinary measures, but for one who has trouble with stress thresholds and boundaries, they are essential to keep me from the exhaustion stage of the stress response. I can tell you, this exercise has opened many doors to me, both creatively and therapeutically. At a minimum, during long periods of stressful work, focusing on the breath helps break the habit of shallow breathing, something we do automatically under strain.

Experiment with other breathing exercises, most of which can be done at your desk, some that relax and some that also invigorate. For example, try the “bellows breath” for a pick-me-up instead of caffeine. Breathe in and out rapidly through the nose, keeping the mouth closed. Inhalation and exhalation should be equal and short, like bellows pumping air, as rapidly as about three cycles per second if you can do it comfortably. At first, try this exercise for about 15 seconds, then breathe normally. Work up to one minute. Or try the mental reversal of inhalation and exhalation by breathing out first as the beginning of the breath cycle.

- **Guided imagery.** By adding guided imagery to the relaxation response invoked by breathing exercises, the results are even greater. Try this exercise. Slowly inhale, your tummy should expand and rise, not your chest. Hold it for few seconds. Slowly exhale. Repeat several times. As you inhale, mentally spell: R - E - L - A - X and say *relax*. As you slowly exhale, mentally spell L - E - T G - O and say *let go*.

Continue your mental self-talk by saying:

“Neck relax.”

“Shoulders relax.”

“Body relax.”

“I am productively relaxed.”

To demonstrate the power of mental imagery, try this test: Close your eyes. Visualize a lemon; start peeling it. Cut the lemon. The juice of the lemon flows onto the plate. Cut it again, and again. The juice flows onto the plate more. Pick up a piece and put it in your mouth. Chew. Notice your salivary glands, the tension in your shoulders, neck, and tongue.

In contrast, visualize your favorite image of refuge and peace. Maybe, it’s the beach, a meadow, a mountain top. Mentally put yourself there. Continue to be there, experiencing all that you see and feel around you. Breathe in the goodness, the peace that is there. Exhale the stress of everyday life. You are safe there; you belong there. There is no fear. There is no hurry, only

serenity, acceptance, wholeness. You may stay as long as you need. Continue breathing, being . . . inhaling, exhaling. Life is safe here.

During difficult times, how often do you hear someone say, “Hang in there!” Or, “Tie a knot and hang on.” Instead of “hanging” try *floating*. Imagine yourself as a cork floating on the top of troubled waters. Trust the water and your body to hold you.



Laughter is the great leveler.

Mark Twain said, “The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.” How delightful it is to have the capacity to see ourselves and our frailties laughingly! When we stop taking ourselves too seriously, we can see the incongruities and ironies of the human condition. It is the wellspring of humor to realize our own nothingness and the greatness of God.

All humor strips away the pretense of vanity. We pretend to be so important and then fall flat on our faces. It’s as funny as slipping on banana peel. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare wrote, “But man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep, who had they our spleen, would all themselves laugh human.” In other words, the angels are dying laughing at our antics. So should we.

Good humor makes most things tolerable at work. Environmental stressors account for about 20 percent of stress while 80 percent of stress comes from emotions. Good emotions, like humor, get the endorphins and the endocrine system going, benefiting the alleviation of many diseases. Extensive research backs up claims that laughter lowers blood pressure and heart rate, increases respiration, and reduces depression. Laughing is an effective strategy to reduce stress, fear, intimidation, and anger. Norman Cousins literally laughed himself to good health. Albert Schweitzer considered humor a cure-all. Freud considered humor an effective therapy. Abraham Lincoln laughed to cope. He said, “With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die.” And, so shall we.



Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.²¹

Abundant evidence shows that music has therapeutic value, is used extensively for healing in hospitals, and improves performance in education. Exposure to music enhances reading readiness, math proficiency, memory functions, and relieves stress. Sweet harmonious sounds affect neurological functions, slow respiration and pulse, and lower blood pressure—not to mention giving exquisite joy. Fast tempos do the opposite (except the joy part!). Music is the universal language, lifting, and enriching: it is a friend of labor.

Resiliency Strategies: Managing the Body

Longfellow said, “If the mind, that rules the body, ever so far forgets itself as to trample on its slave, the slave is never generous enough to forgive the injury, but will rise and smite the oppressor.” Stress is your body’s reaction to any demand placed on it, and we want to avoid getting smitten. We are always under stress, because there are always demands being placed on us. We’re not trying to eliminate stress; we are trying to control excessive and unnecessary stress. The body basically responds to stress in a three-stage process:

1. **Alarm Stage**—you perceive a threat and your body immediately mobilizes for action.
2. **Adapt and Repair Stage**—responsibility for managing the stress is delegated to the organ or system best equipped for handling it. As soon as the threat has passed, the damage is repaired and an internal balance is regained.
3. **Exhaustion Stage**—the consequences of not giving the body an adequate opportunity to go through stage two—the adapt and repair stage are exhaustion. Behavioral and physical symptoms will appear at this stage:

Mental Stress Symptoms

Agitation
 Anger
 Forgetfulness
 Frustration
 Inflexibility
 Blaming
 Bossiness
 Worrying
 Crying
 Impatience
 Carelessness
 Loneliness
 Escapism
 Feelings of inadequacy
 Hopelessness
 Being cynical
 Feeling trapped
 Inability to concentrate

Physical Stress Symptoms

Depression
 Fatigue
 Backaches
 Stiff neck & Shoulders
 Stomach aches
 Diarrhea
 Teeth grinding
 Yelling
 Skin temperature increase
 Compulsive eating, smoking, drinking, drugs
 Individual localized stress responses
 Impotence
 Nausea
 Delayed menstruation
 Dizziness
 Headaches
 Insomnia
 Depressed immune function
 Chronic muscle tension
 Common cold

So, by the time we're having a constellation of symptoms, we're already at the exhaustion stage to a greater or lesser degree. The more stress characteristics we have, the harder it is to restore our equilibrium. Ideally, we could avoid the exhaustion stage altogether, but most of us find this

impossible. How we choose to respond to these discomforts can be destructive or healing. What we don't want to do is resort to quick fixes that have no lasting impact. Using prescription drugs and alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and binging on food give the illusion of relieving tension, but are surefire stress failures in the end. Caffeine, other stimulants, and high-fat foods also inhibit the body's ability to heal itself and only add to the level of stress. Instead, experiment with the following stress fighters:

Exercise: Hippocrates's admonition, "That which you do not use, you lose" reminds us of the natural entropy of the human body. He considered exercise our best medicine. Our bodies, especially our muscles, act like sponges absorbing the excess energy in the form of tension, created by the stress reaction. Exercise is a positive means to burn off this excess energy. A second benefit is the release of endorphins by the brain and pituitary gland that inhibits a negative emotional response to stress. One more time, the benefits of regular exercise are many:

- Improves efficiency of heart and lungs
- Increases oxygen supply to the brain improving mental alertness
- Reduces blood pressure and pulse
- Burns off excess fats and sugars that accumulate from emotional stress
- Lowers cholesterol
- Improves metabolism so that body burns more calories even when not exercising
- Improves muscle/fat ratio
- Improves muscle tone, strength, endurance, flexibility, coordination, and reflexes
- Builds thicker, denser, and stronger bones
- Retards the aging process
- Improves digestion of food
- Burns off excess tension and promotes positive mental health

Exercise improves the efficiency of all body systems and increases oxygen to the brain, improving mental alertness. The ingredients of proper exercise include

- Duration—minimum of 20 minutes per session
- Intensity—within personal training zone: $220 - \text{your age} = \text{maximum heart beats (MHB)}$; $\text{MHB} \times 65\% = \text{low training zone}$; $\text{MHB} \times 80\% = \text{high training zone}$.
- Frequency—3 to 5 times a week.

Muscle imagery. This is done by visualizing various muscle groups in the body, alternating tensing and relaxing. For example, lie on your back, palms up, beginning at your toes, curl them tightly, hold for a few seconds, and relax them. Continue to work from the toes to the top of the head, isolating specific muscle groups combined with deep breathing. You can also do this at your desk (without lying down, of course!).

Proper nutrition. Among the many ways to improve your diet and become nutritionally fit, the following list of nutritional alternatives is recommended:

- Keep energy intake equal to energy expenditure.
- Decrease the intake of highly refined and processed foods.
- Increase the consumption of raw fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, and nuts.
- Reduce the consumption of all refined and processed sugars.
- Reduce the consumption of saturated fats commonly found in animal meats, dairy products, and commercial bakery products.
- Reduce or eliminate the consumption of caffeine and alcohol.
- Space caloric intake through out the day, stopping at least two hours before bedtime.
- Drink at least eight glasses of water per day.
- Keep carbohydrates balanced with protein.

Computer work first aid. Don't forget to move more than your fingers! Frequently move your head, side to side. Roll your shoulders to the front and backward. Place your chin down on your chest and slowly roll your head to the right, back to the back, to the left, and down to the front again. Get up at least every hour to move around, stand up, stretch upward to the ceiling as high as possible and flop over like a rag doll.

Resiliency Strategies: Managing the Environment

Developing perceptual flexibility to evaluate situations in a variety of ways is essential to managing the environment at work. Most of this book focuses on increasing the ability to adapt to changing demands. It helps to have new ideas to broaden our perspective of our worklife. However, the best teacher is experience. Give yourself a grace period in every new work situation to learn where the pot-holes are and what to do about them:

Chapter 1:

I walk down the street.
There's a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in. I am lost.
I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out!

Chapter 2:

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again!
I can't believe I am in the same place!
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out!

Chapter 3:

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I still fall in!
It is a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately!

Chapter 4:

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it!

Chapter 5:

I walk down a different street!²²

With time and experience, we not only become savvy about our environment, we develop more control in ways that prevent problems and the stress that comes with them.

Resiliency Strategies: Managing the Spirit

Most of us are prodded by our sixth sense, an awareness that goes beyond our physical and mental abilities: a force that is real, though not seen that calls for a return to what is basic and necessary to live in harmony. Whether we are victims of adversity or our own “toxic” success, the lack of balance in the daily stream of our lives robs us of our natural ability to feel connected to ourselves and each other in profound and fulfilling ways. The general theme of this book has been to acquire a “balanced spiritual toughness” from *all* experiences both good and bad. “Happiness is to take up the struggle in the midst of the raging storm and not to pluck the lute in the moonlight and recite poetry among the blossoms.”²³ To live in this way demands a larger view of life—a contemplative, soulful approach—to develop the perspective that achieving completeness is an eternal, infinite, sacred process. Mark Nepo writes,

Each person is born with an unencumbered spot, free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of worry, an umbilical spot of grace where we were each first touched by God. It is the spot of grace that issues peace. Psychologists call this spot the Psyche, Theologists call it the Soul, Jung calls it The Seat of the Unconscious, Hindu masters call it the Atman, Buddhists call it the Dharma, Rilke calls it Inwardness, Sufis call it Qualb, and Jesus calls it The Center of Our Love.

To know this spot of inwardness is to know who we are, not by surface markers of identity, not by where we work or what we wear or how we like to be addressed but by feeling our place in relation to the Infinite and by inhabiting it. This is a hard lifelong task, for the nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. We each live in the midst of this ongoing tension, growing tarnished or covered over only to be worn back to that incorruptible spot of grace at our core.²⁴

This inner knowing is the anchor of my life. Because of it, I am never truly disconnected from the golden thread of peace. While I may sometimes forget the connection, in the deepest part of my heart I know I am attached. This at-one-ment facilitates the removal of the “tarnish” and “erosion of what is not essential”—things that cause me to “forget.” As a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ, I believe that my covenants connect me to the will of God. The cleansing and buffing occur through the process of continual repentance and renewal of sacred promises. The ritual of binding myself to Deity reminds me that I need not struggle to combine the sacred and secular; it is already bound. Regardless of how we “act,” we are always on hallowed ground. Apology reminds us we have strayed and that adjustments are in order. To consecrate the ordinary, we need only to

pause to catch our breath to realize the “amazing grace” of the powerful force that nurtures us all and to begin again.

The Polynesians call this process *aloha*, “sharing the breath of life.” To share the breath of life, we abandon the survival tactics we often adopt when overwhelmed by the awesome and divine nature of being human:

- wearing a mask that shields our true feelings
- requiring constant stimulation
- pridefully attaching to materialism and control
- seeking fraudulent intimacy and ways of belonging
- showing ingratitude—“worshipping” for only an hour on Sunday, if at all;
- practicing deception with ourselves and others.

The ultimate goal of spiritual growth is to become one with God. When any of these avoidance tactics is taken to excess, we get into trouble. Heroes evolve through conscious choices to become a form of grace, working on behalf of God among mankind to create harmony where it did not exist before. As His arms, we pull our fellow travelers up to higher ground on which to stand, imbuing a more keen awareness of what is real, relevant, reverent, and repentant.

Connecting or reconnecting “the breath of life” with ourselves and others in our worklife by spiritual means, we replace competition with edification. To edify is to instruct and help others in ways that encourage intellectual, moral, or spiritual improvement: to comfort, enlighten, elevate, and uplift in preparation for the great work that each person is meant to do. Serving others in this way transcends our natural inclinations to self-centeredness. Adopting concern for co-workers’ total welfare, including moral or spiritual progression, invokes a “seventh sense”: a unity of purpose to promote joy in our worklife, not just his or her “efficiency” or “effectiveness” in a business realm. Study after study shows that something very powerful happens in the realm of the spiritual: intensely pleasurable feelings; spontaneous healing; curtailed drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; improved general health; more satisfying relationships; and quicker recovery from illness. In addition, we may also rescue our own souls in the process.

Endnotes

1. “Workers Drowning in Messages, Voice Mail, Survey Shows,” *Deseret News*, June 9–10, 1998.
2. John Carpi, “Stress: It’s Worse Than You Think,” *Psychology Today*, January–February, 1996.
3. Carpi, “Stress,” 34.
4. Carpi “Stress,” 36.
5. W. Ganong, *Medical Physiology* (Los Altos: Lange Medical Publishers, 1977).
6. Carpi, “Stress,” 40.
7. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, selected by John A Widtsoe, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 228.
8. Paul Pearsall, Ph.D. *The Pleasure Prescription* (Alameda, CA: Hunter House Publishers, 1996), 13. (Pearsall explains that most people do not understand that the hula is not meant for entertainment; it is a form of prayer, an ancient, sacred tradition.)
9. Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 82–84, espec. 84.
10. Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 88.
11. Steven J. Wolin, and Sybil Wolin, *The Resilient Self* (New York: Villard Books, 1993.)
12. Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 99.
13. Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 66.
14. Ann Landers, quoted in *Words on Courage*, edited by Helen Exley (New York: Exley Publications, 1997).
15. Claire Rayner, *Words of Courage* edited by Helen Exley (New York and Great Britain: Exley Publications, 1997)
16. Wayne Muller, *Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 27.
17. Muller, *Legacy of the Heart*, 27.
18. Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 87.
19. Pearsall, *The Pleasure Prescription*, 206–210.

20. Andrew Weil, *8 Weeks to Optimum Health* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 60.
21. Berthold Auerbach, quoted in *The International Dictionary of Thoughts* (Chicago: J. G. Ferguson Publishing Company, 1969), 504.
22. Portia Nelson, quoted in *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace with Your Past and Get on With Your Life* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 189.
23. J. Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Delta, 1990), 17.
24. Mark Nepo, quoted in Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 261.