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Resilience in the face of disaster

Genetics, problem-solving skills and relationships affect how well someone bounces back. But resiliency can also be learned.
By Jeannine Stein

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Most of us can't comprehend the devastation of losing everything -- our home and all its contents -- suddenly and irrevocably and with no chance of retrieving even one personal belonging. Yet some 842 homes were destroyed in the most recent Southern California wildfires, leaving the people who lived in them without shelter, possessions or, in some cases, much more than the clothes they were wearing when they fled.

As they sift through rubble, deal with insurance companies and attempt to return to normality, some people will fare better than others, finding their emotional footing more quickly and coping with adversity more ably. In a word, they have resiliency.

Across the Southland were scenes of grief and disbelief as people returned to what was left of their homes -- a half-burned toy, a book or two left intact, an appliance mangled by the intense heat.

One L.A. Times reporter found Mike and Julienne Chene sifting through what was left of their Yorba Linda home, both laughing and crying. Said Julienne, "It comes in waves."

At the Oakridge Mobile Home Park in Sylmar, residents tried to see what was left of their homes. "It was so sad," Mary Rios said. "We're going to be disconnected from everyone. It's hard."

"There is no one factor that will predict who's going to do well and who's not going to do well," said Demy Kamboukos, a research scientist at the Institute for Trauma and Resilience at the New York University Child Study Center. "It's really a combination of genetic predispositions and interactions with family and community."

Perhaps the most important inborn trait is being even-tempered. "Some kids are just born with an easy temperament," Kamboukos says, "and are able to adjust more easily to change and disruption."

Then there are problem-solving skills, which give both adults and kids a feeling of control. These are especially useful during times of crisis, when decisive action is needed.

Similarly, being expressive and outgoing makes for an easier time after a disaster, says Karin Hart, an Agoura Hills-based psychologist and clinical instructor at UCLA who also serves on the disaster mental health advisory council for the Red Cross. Those traits can make a person more likely to ask for help.

Part of dealing with tragedy, say mental health experts, is being able to talk about it, as well as express emotions such as grief, anger and fear. "Having connections and good relationships is so crucial in recovering from trauma," Hart said. "It's really important to get help from people who care about you and are willing to listen to you. It's invaluable. Getting involved in civic groups or faith organizations for social support can help with reestablishing a sense of hope."

Making those connections is not always easy in Southern California, where people can live for years in a community without knowing their neighbors.

But residents of some neighborhoods -- especially those in outlying areas -- are often close and caring, which can be an advantage in times of disaster. Kenneth Kondo, public information officer for the L.A. County Department of Mental Health, saw evidence of that among residents of the Sylmar mobile home park, which lost about 500 homes.

"They're a very strong, tightly knit community," he said, "and they look out for each other. I was on the bus with them as they looked at the devastation. The people whose homes had survived went over to their neighbors who had lost their homes and said, 'Don't worry, we're going to do this together.'"

Having that support and encouragement may help people pull through more quickly, knowing that they're not alone and that others are willing to help.

Ways to cope

Not all traits that make people more resilient are innate. Many -- such as adapting to change -- can be learned, says Jana N. Martin, a Long Beach-based psychologist and spokeswoman for the American Psychological Assn. Thinking about how past upheavals -- even small ones -- were lived through can help people get through major turmoils.

"If you had a good friend who moved away, you learned through that experience that you can adapt and be happy no matter what. Also, you can talk to people who have been through tough times and ask them what they're doing to get through, and what's been helpful in the past."

However, having experienced several major traumas can make some people less resilient, says Janine Shelby, director of the Child Crisis Center at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

So can having a personal or family history of psychiatric illness, severe family dysfunction, family health problems and socioeconomic or intellectual difficulties.

Still, much of what factors into being resilient boils down to attitude -- whether people see themselves as victim or survivor and whether they perceive their circumstances as insurmountable or manageable.

Instead of tapping into resources for basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter, for example, someone less resilient may withdraw, become angry and not make those important efforts to rebuild their lives, prolonging the process and keeping their lives in a state of disarray.

Understanding how to take small steps and make manageable goals are ways of feeling more in control. Hart recalls talking with an older man in a shelter who was weeping, worrying about how he'd provide for his family.

"It was obvious he was totally overwhelmed," she said. "I talked to him about what he could do today, not worry about taking care of his family for the rest of his life. That afternoon I saw him at the computer looking up resources."

How someone adapts to tragedy can be rooted in their culture too, Kamboukos said. "Some cultures have more of a fatalistic outlook along the lines of, if it's meant to be, it's meant to be, or a higher being willed this to happen. [People who believe this] tend to do better, because they have more acceptance of the situation."

Mental health professionals who counsel disaster victims on-site say they look for tell-tale signs that people are coping -- or not coping -- with the situation.

"I look for that glassy, glazed look," said Robert Levine, a licensed L.A. therapist who was counseling fire victims through his work with the county's Department of Mental Health. "Those are the people you have to worry about."

Highs and lows

But even being resilient doesn't make someone immune from the emotional highs and lows that are sure to accompany a catastrophe.

"It's when we get stuck on those stages -- depression or denial or blame or anger -- that it creates consequences and spills into other phases of life," said Stephen Mayberg, director of the California Department of Mental Health. "The quicker you can get back to normal, the better you're going to deal with the challenges ahead of you."

Mental health experts say most people are resilient enough to endure a calamity such as losing a home -- and some may come out better for it. Those who tied up their identity with possessions might find that objects now take a back seat to relationships.

"During tragic times, we often have opportunities to discover things about ourselves that are strengths," Martin said.

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