



# OPTION B

A free excerpt  
from Option B

*With a new foreword  
on resilience in the  
COVID-19 crisis*

FACING ADVERSITY,  
BUILDING RESILIENCE,  
AND FINDING JOY

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SHERYL SANDBERG

*LEAN IN*

ADAM GRANT

*ORIGINALS*

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## Resilience in crisis

As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading across the globe. People everywhere are feeling fear, shock, and sadness. Many of us are sheltering at home, unable to see loved ones. Many have lost their jobs or worry they're about to. And many are sick or will be. It's a scary time.

Some have observed that this feeling we're carrying around right now is more than anxiety—it's grief. Some of us are grieving the loss of loved ones. Even more of us are grieving the loss of normalcy. The pandemic has shattered our illusion of invulnerability. It has reminded us of the fragility of both our lives and of life as we know it. It is understandable that so many people are feeling deeply down.

Five years ago, I lost my husband Dave suddenly. In the depths of my grief, looking for insights about how to get my children and myself through it, I turned to my friend Adam Grant, a psychologist at Wharton. Together, we started studying how people can recover and rebound from life-shattering experiences. Eventually we wrote the book *Option B* to share what we learned about resilience. Since many of those lessons are relevant to the current crisis, we've decided to make some key excerpts openly available, with the hope that they may be useful to people trying to get through this painful time.

After spending decades studying how people deal with setbacks and challenges, psychologists have [found](#) that three P's can stunt recovery: (1) personalization—the belief that we are at fault; (2) permanence—the belief that the aftershocks of the event will last forever; and (3) pervasiveness—the belief that an event will affect all areas of our life.

Personalization is happening all around us. Some people are blaming themselves for not doing enough to protect their friends and family, or feeling guilty for doing too little to help strangers. Others are beating themselves up for feeling lonely or unproductive. Instead of self-blame, psychologists recommend self-compassion: showing ourselves the same kindness we would extend to someone close to us. This is not our fault. We are only human. We may feel lonely, but we are not alone in that feeling.

It can be hard to shake the impression of permanence too. When we're suffering, we tend to project it out indefinitely. There's a lot of uncertainty around how long this pandemic will last, which makes the sense of unyielding doom and gloom particularly daunting. It helps to remember that all pain is temporary. Although we don't know when this crisis will end, we know that it *will* end.

Another big lesson is to reject the sense of pervasiveness. During a tragedy, when things are so much worse than usual, it's easy to get caught up in the feeling that everything is awful. But in reality, not everything is. Utilities are still operating. We still have books and board games and movies to enjoy at home. We can still reach out to loved ones by phone or through the internet. In some cases, being far apart physically is bringing us closer together emotionally. With separation comes a renewed sense of appreciation.

Research has shown that gratitude can lift our spirits even when we're at our lowest. I learned this firsthand after Dave died. Even in the depths of grief, there are still blessings worth counting. I wanted this to become a daily habit for my family, so each night at dinner, my children and I go around the table to discuss what we're grateful for. Since we have been quarantining, our lists have changed. *They are starting school later so I can sleep in. I don't have to wonder where my teenage kids are at night. I got to work in pajamas today . . . or at least pajama bottoms.* Gratitude doesn't just make us happier; it can make us stronger as well.

Rejecting personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness means shifting our mindset. When the future is difficult to imagine, we can find strength by looking to the past. We have all faced personal hardships—from loss, injury, and illness to divorce and rejection, from professional failure to personal disappointment. We have faced collective hardships too—from wars and terrorist attacks to natural disasters and financial crises. By reflecting on how we have confronted adversity before, we can remind ourselves that we have the will and the way to endure this hardship.

Resilience doesn't mean rejecting unpleasant emotions. And letting emotions in doesn't give them power over us; rather, it gives them room to move through us. Sometimes voicing fear gives us some control over it. Psychologists find that worrying is productive because it helps us anticipate and prepare for the worst. It becomes counterproductive when it turns into rumination—when our mental playlist is stuck on a loop of the same thoughts and feelings, without prompting us to plan or act.

With so many life events being disrupted or canceled, for many of us, that mental loop is stuck on our own feelings of despair or disappointment. Ultimately, what helps us most is looking for ways to help others. When people are counting on us, we find strength we didn't know we had. In his research, Adam has [found](#) that we often go to greater lengths to wash our hands and maintain physical distance for others than for ourselves. Taking care of family, friends, or our community can distract us from our grief. It can give us a sense that we matter—that we're noticed and appreciated, that we

make a difference. I have taught my children that when they feel lonely and are missing their friends, they can call their grandparents and help them feel less alone.

In times of tragedy, Mister Rogers advised children, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” We do not have to look far. To develop and test vaccines, scientists are collaborating at a pace and on a scale unprecedented in human history. To care for the sick, health-care professionals are risking their lives. To provide communities with the resources and supplies many once took for granted, people are showing up to work in warehouses, grocery stores, and pharmacies. To help the elderly, strangers are picking up food and medications and delivering them to their homes. We have the chance to not just look for the helpers, but to be the helpers ourselves.

This crisis has demonstrated once again the indomitability and ingenuity of the human spirit. In Italy, people are finding harmony in hibernation by opening their windows to sing together. In London, people are finding connection in isolation by holding daily dance parties on their driveways. In Brazil, people are staying active by pouring dish-washing soap on their kitchen floors, turning them into makeshift treadmills. In New York, some landlords are waiving rent for tenants. They remind us that post-traumatic stress is not the only option; it is possible to experience post-traumatic growth. We can do more than just bounce back—we can bounce forward.

This pandemic has brought tragedy and chaos to our lives. Throughout history, we have seen that crises like this do not just test our resolve. They can also build our resilience. Read on to learn how.

## What is resilience?

After my husband Dave died without any warning, I was in “the void”: a vast emptiness that fills your heart and lungs and restricts your ability to think or even breathe. I thought resilience was the capacity to endure pain, so I asked Adam how I could figure out how much I had. He explained that this was the wrong question. Our amount of resilience isn’t fixed, so I should be asking instead how I could *become* resilient.

Resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity—and we can build it. It isn’t about having a backbone. It’s about strengthening the muscles around our backbone.

I don’t know anyone who has been handed only roses. We all encounter hardships. Some we see coming; others take us by surprise. It can be as tragic as the sudden death of a child, as heartbreaking as a relationship that unravels, or as disappointing as a dream that goes unfulfilled. The question is: When these things happen, what do we do next?

This book is my and Adam’s attempt to share what we’ve learned about resilience. We wrote it together, but for simplicity and clarity the story is told by me (Sheryl) while Adam is referred to in the third person. We don’t pretend that hope will win out over pain every day. It won’t. We don’t presume to have experienced every possible kind of loss and setback ourselves. We haven’t. There is no right or proper way to grieve or face challenges, so we don’t have perfect answers. There are no perfect answers.

We also know that not every story has a happy ending. For each hopeful story we tell here, there are others where circumstances were too much to overcome. Recovery does not start from the same place for everyone. Wars, violence, and systemic sexism and racism decimate lives and communities. Discrimination, disease, and poverty cause and worsen tragedy. The sad truth is that adversity is not evenly distributed among us; marginalized and disenfranchised groups have more to battle and more to grieve.

Talking about how to find strength in the face of hardship does not release us from the responsibility of working to prevent hardship in the first place. What we do in our communities and companies—the public policies we put in place, the ways we help one another—can ensure that fewer people suffer.

Yet try as we might to prevent adversity, inequality, and trauma, they still exist and we are still left to cope with them. To fight for change tomorrow we need to build

resilience today. Psychologists have studied how to recover and rebound from a wide range of hardships. Along with reviewing the research, Adam and I sought out individuals and groups who have overcome ordinary and extraordinary difficulties. Their stories changed the way we think about resilience.

This book is about the capacity of the human spirit to persevere. We look at the steps people can take, both to help themselves and to help others. We explore the psychology of recovery and the challenges of regaining confidence and rediscovering joy. We cover ways to speak about tragedy and comfort friends who are suffering. And we discuss what it takes to create resilient communities and companies, raise strong children, and love again.

I now know that in the wake of the most crushing blows, people can find greater strength and deeper meaning. Along with post-traumatic growth, I also believe that it is possible to experience *pre*-traumatic growth—that you don't have to experience tragedy to build your resilience for whatever lies ahead.

Nietzsche famously described personal strength as “what does not kill me makes me stronger.” Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun have a slightly softer (one could say less Nietzschean) *take*: “I am more vulnerable than I thought, but much stronger than I ever imagined.” When we face the slings and arrows of life, we are wounded and the scars stay with us. But we can walk away with greater internal resolve.

Just weeks after losing Dave, I was talking to my friend Phil Deutch about a father-child activity that Dave had planned on doing with our son. We came up with a plan for someone to fill in for Dave. I cried to Phil, “But I want Dave.” He put his arm around me and said, “Option A is not available. So let's just kick the shit out of Option B.”

Life is never perfect. In this crisis, we are all living Option B. This book is to help us all kick the shit out of it.

## Talking about hardship

In the early weeks after Dave died, I was shocked when I'd see friends who did not ask how I was doing. I felt invisible, as if I were standing in front of them but they couldn't see me. When someone shows up with a cast, we immediately inquire, "What happened?" If your ankle gets shattered, people ask to hear the story. If your life gets shattered, they don't.

Even people who have endured the worst suffering often want to talk about it. Merle Saferstein is one of my mom's closest friends and the former education director at the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center in South Florida. She has worked with more than five hundred survivors and remembers only one who declined to open up. "In my experience, survivors want the opportunity to teach and not be shunned because they went through something unknowable," Merle said. Still, people hesitate to ask questions out of concern that probing will dredge up trauma. To encourage discussion, Merle ran programs that brought survivors together with high school and college students. She notes that when students are offered the chance, questions tumble out. "I've heard them inquire, 'What did you eat in the concentration camp? Did you still believe in God?' Young girls will often ask, 'Did you get your period? What did you do when you did?' These aren't personal questions. They are human questions," Merle told me.

Avoiding feelings isn't the same as protecting feelings. Merle recalled going with a young cousin of hers to visit an elderly couple who had clay handprints of two children hanging on their wall. The couple spoke of only one daughter. Merle's young cousin had been told not to mention their daughter who died because it would make the couple sad. Merle hadn't heard this warning, so she asked about the second set of prints. While the cousin looked aghast, the couple spoke warmly and at length about their daughter. "They wanted her to be remembered," Merle said.

Avoiding upsetting topics is so common that the practice even has a name. Decades ago, psychologists coined the term "[mum effect](#)" for when people avoid sharing bad news. Doctors [hold back](#) on telling patients that their prognosis is [bleak](#). Managers [wait](#) too long to break the news that people are being fired. My colleague Maxine Williams, head of diversity at Facebook, told me that she believes many people succumb to the mum effect around race. "Even after an unarmed black person is killed for reaching over to show a cop his license, white people who have seen the news, who live in these communities, and who sit at the desk next to us at work will often say nothing," Maxine said. "For the victim of racism, like the victim of loss, the silence is crippling. The two



things we want to know when we're in pain are that we're not crazy to feel the way we do and that we have support. Acting like nothing significant is happening to people who look like us denies us all of that.”

By staying silent, we often isolate family, friends, and coworkers. Even under ordinary circumstances, being alone with your thoughts can be uncomfortable. Silence can increase suffering. I only felt comfortable bringing up Dave with a small group of family and friends. Some of my other friends and coworkers made it easy for me to open up; psychologists literally call them “openers.” Openers ask a lot of questions and listen to the answers without judging. They enjoy learning about and feeling connected to others. Openers can make a big difference in times of crisis, especially for those who are normally reticent.

Openers are not always our closest friends. People who have faced adversity tend to express more compassion toward others who are suffering. Writer Anna Quindlen observes that grief is discussed among “those of us who recognize in one another a kindred chasm deep in the center of who we are.” Military veterans, rape victims, and parents whose children have died all report that the most helpful support usually comes from those who have suffered similar losses. When Holocaust survivors came to the United States, Merle told me, “they felt very isolated, so they started bonding with each other. That’s why the survivor clubs formed. The only people who really understood were the people who had been through those experiences.”

The traditional Jewish period of mourning for a spouse lasts thirty days. I was nearing the end of the month when I thought about expressing how I felt on Facebook. I poured my emotions into a post but didn’t think I’d ever share it—it was too personal, too raw, too revealing. Finally, I decided it was unlikely to make things worse and maybe it would make them a bit better. Early the next morning before I could change my mind, I hit “post.”

My message began by describing the void and how easy it was to get sucked in. I said that for the first time ever, I understood the power of the prayer “Let me not die while I am still alive.” Grasping for a lifeline, I wrote about how I wanted to choose meaning over emptiness. I thanked my family and friends who had helped me through those incomprehensible first weeks. Then I did what proved so difficult to do with friends and colleagues face-to-face: I described how a casual greeting like “How are you?” hurt because it didn’t acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary had happened. I pointed out that if people instead asked “How are you today?” it showed that they were aware that I was struggling to get through each day.

The impact of my post was immediate. Friends, neighbors, and colleagues started talking about the elephant in the room. Emails poured in with messages like “I know it must be really hard. I’ve been thinking about you and your kids.”

Not everyone feels comfortable talking openly about personal tragedy. We all make our own choices about when and where and if we want to express our feelings. Still, there’s powerful [evidence](#) that opening up about traumatic events can improve mental and physical health. Speaking to a friend or family member often [helps](#) people understand their own emotions and feel understood.

After my post, one welcome change was that people began asking, “How are you *today*?” which became a shorthand way to express empathy. That question also helped me realize that my all-encompassing grief might not be permanent. Adam pointed out that I would often answer “How are you?” with “Fine,” and that didn’t encourage people to ask further questions. He said if I wanted others to be more open with me, I needed to be more open with them. I started responding more frankly. “I’m not fine, and it’s nice to be able to be honest about that with you.”

Lots of people nicely tried to assure me, “You will get through this,” but it was hard to believe them. What helped me more was when people said that they were in it with me. Phil did this time and again, saying, “*We* are going to get through this.” When he was away, he sent emails, sometimes with just one line: “You are not alone.” One of my childhood girlfriends sent a card that read, “One day she woke up and understood we are all in this together.” That card has hung above my desk ever since.

## Supporting others

In classic [experiments](#) on stress, people [performed](#) tasks that required concentration, like solving puzzles, while being blasted at random intervals with uncomfortably loud sounds. They started sweating and their heart rates and blood pressure climbed. They struggled to focus and made mistakes. Many got so frustrated that they gave up. Searching for a way to reduce anxiety, researchers gave some of the participants an escape. If the noise became too unpleasant, they could press a button and make it stop. Sure enough, the button allowed them to stay calmer, make fewer mistakes, and show less irritation. That's not surprising. But here's what is: *none of the participants actually pressed the button*. Stopping the noise didn't make the difference . . . knowing they could stop the noise did. The button gave them a sense of control and allowed them to endure the stress.

When people close to us face adversity, how do we give them a button to press? While it seems obvious that friends want to support friends going through a crisis, there are barriers that block us. There are [two different emotional](#) responses to the pain of others: empathy, which motivates us to help, and distress, which motivates us to avoid. Writer Allen Rucker observed both reactions after being suddenly paralyzed by a rare disorder. "As some friends checked in daily with deli sandwiches, the complete films of Alfred Hitchcock, or just kindness, others were curiously absent," he [wrote](#). "It was my first indication that my new condition could breed fear in people other than myself." For some, his physical paralysis triggered emotional paralysis.

When we hear that someone we care about has lost a job, started chemo, or is going through a divorce, our first impulse is usually "I should reach out." Then right after that impulse doubts often flood our mind. "What if I say the wrong thing?" "What if talking about it makes her feel self-conscious?" "What if I'm overstepping?" Once raised, these doubts are followed by excuses like "He has so many friends and we're not *that* close." Or "She must be so busy. I don't want to bother her." We put off calling or offering help until we feel guilty that we didn't do it sooner . . . and then it feels too late.

For friends who turn away in times of difficulty, putting distance between themselves and emotional pain feels like self-preservation. These are the people who see someone drowning in sorrow and then worry, perhaps subconsciously, that they will be dragged under too. Others get overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness; they feel there's nothing they can say or do to make things better, so they choose to say and do nothing. But what we learn from the stress experiment is that the button didn't need to stop the noise to relieve the pressure. Simply showing up for a friend can make a huge difference.

It's hard to understand—or even imagine—another person's pain. When we're not in a physically or emotionally intense state, we underestimate its impact. In one [experiment](#), people were asked to put their arm in a bucket of water and guess how painful it would be to sit in a freezing room for five hours. When the bucket was filled with ice water, they predicted that sitting in the room would be 14 percent more painful than when the bucket was filled with warm water. But when people made their predictions just ten minutes after removing their arm from the ice water, they made the same estimates as the warm water group. Once the icy water was behind them, even for just minutes, they couldn't quite fathom what it felt like to be cold. (On the bright side, there are very few situations in real life where you find yourself with your arm in a bucket of ice water.)

There's no one way to grieve and there's no one way to comfort. What helps one person won't help another, and even what helps one day might not help the next. Growing up, I was taught to follow the Golden Rule: treat others as you want to be treated. But when someone is suffering, instead of following the Golden Rule, we need to follow the Platinum Rule: treat others as *they* want to be treated. Take a cue from the person in distress and respond with understanding—or better yet, action.

As I was struggling to get back on my feet at home and at work, friends and colleagues would graciously ask, "Is there anything I can do?" They were sincere, but for most of them, I did not have an answer. Author Bruce Feiler believes the problem lies in the offer to "do anything." He [writes](#) that "while well meaning, this gesture unintentionally shifts the obligation to the aggrieved. Instead of offering 'anything,' just do something." Bruce points to friends who sent packing supplies to someone who was moving out after getting divorced and others who held a "fire shower," a variation on a bridal shower, for a friend who had lost her home. My colleague Dan Levy told me that when his son got sick and he was by his side at the hospital, a friend texted him, "What do you NOT want on a burger?" Dan appreciated the effort. "Instead of asking if I wanted food, he made the choice for me but gave me the dignity of feeling in control." Another friend texted Dan that she was available for a hug if he needed one and would be in the hospital lobby for the next hour whether he came downstairs or not.

Specific acts help because instead of trying to fix the problem, they address the damage caused by the problem. "Some things in life cannot be fixed. They can only be carried," therapist Megan Devine [observes](#). Even the small act of holding someone's hand can be helpful. Psychologists [put](#) teenage girls under stress by asking them to give a spontaneous public speech. When mothers and daughters who were close held hands, the physical contact took away some of the daughters' anxiety. The daughters sweated less and the physiological stress was transferred to the mothers.

This effect resonates with me. Four days after I found Dave on the gym floor, I gave a eulogy at his funeral. I initially thought I would not be able to get through it, but my children wanted to say something and I felt that I had to show them I could too. My sister Michelle stood beside me and gripped my hand tightly. I didn't know about the mother-daughter study then, but her hand in mine gave me courage.

Dave was a constant source of strength—a button not just for me but for so many. Now where would his friends and family turn for support? A helpful insight comes from psychologist Susan Silk, who devised the “ring theory.” She suggests writing down the names of the people in the center of the tragedy and drawing a circle around them. Then draw a bigger circle around that one and write the names of the people who are next most affected by the event. Keep drawing larger circles for people based on proximity to the crisis. As Silk [writes](#) with mediator Barry Goldman, “When you are done you have a Kvetching Order.”

Wherever you are in the circle, offer comfort in and seek comfort out. That means consoling the people who are closer to the tragedy than you are and reaching out for support from those who are farther removed.

## Cultivating self-compassion

Self-compassion isn't talked about as much as it should be, maybe because it's often confused with its troublesome cousins, self-pity and self-indulgence. Psychologist Kristin Neff describes self-compassion as offering the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to a friend. It allows us to respond to our own errors with concern and understanding rather than criticism and shame.

Self-compassion comes from recognizing that our imperfections are part of being human. Those who can tap into it recover from hardship faster. In a study of people whose marriages fell apart, resilience was not related to their self-esteem, optimism, or depression before divorce, or to how long their relationships or separations had lasted. What helped people cope with distress and move on was self-compassion. For soldiers returning from war in Afghanistan and Iraq, those who were kind to themselves showed significant declines in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Self-compassion is associated with greater happiness and satisfaction, fewer emotional difficulties, and less anxiety. As psychologist Mark Leary observes, self-compassion “can be an antidote to the cruelty we sometimes inflict on ourselves.”

Writing can be a powerful tool for learning self-compassion. In one experiment, people were asked to recall a failure or humiliation that had made them feel bad about themselves, ranging from flunking a big test to flopping in an athletic competition to forgetting lines in a play. They drafted a letter to themselves expressing the understanding they would offer to a friend in the same situation. Compared to a control group who wrote just about their positive attributes, those who were kind to themselves were 40 percent happier and 24 percent less angry.

Turning feelings into words can help us process and overcome adversity. Decades ago, health psychologist Jamie Pennebaker had two groups of college students journal for fifteen minutes a day for just four days—some about nonemotional topics and others about the most traumatic experience of their lives, which included rape, attempted suicide, and child abuse. After the first day of writing, the second group was less happy and had higher blood pressure. But when Pennebaker followed up six months later, the effects reversed and those who wrote about their traumas were significantly better off emotionally and physically.

Since then, more than a hundred experiments have documented the therapeutic effect of journaling. It has helped medical students, patients with chronic pain, crime victims, maximum-security prisoners, and women after childbirth. It has crossed cultures and

countries from Belgium to Mexico to New Zealand. Writing about [traumatic events](#) can decrease anxiety and anger, boost grades, reduce absences from work, and lessen the emotional impact of [job loss](#). Health benefits include higher T-cell counts, better liver function, and stronger antibody responses. Even journaling for a few minutes a few times can make a difference. “You don’t have to write for the rest of your life,” Pennebaker told us. “You can start and stop when you feel you need to.”

Labeling negative emotions makes them easier to deal with. The more specific the label, the [better](#). “I’m feeling lonely” helps us process more than the vague “I’m feeling awful.” By putting feelings into words, we give ourselves more power over them. In one [study](#), people with a phobia of spiders learned they were going to interact with one. But first the participants were instructed to distract themselves, think of the spider as nonthreatening, do nothing, or label their feelings about the spider. When the spider showed up, those who labeled their fear exhibited significantly less physiological arousal and were more willing to approach it.

Journaling helped me process my overwhelming feelings and my all-too-many regrets. I thought constantly about how if I’d known that Dave and I had only eleven years, I would’ve made sure we spent more time together. I wished that in the hard moments in our marriage, we had fought less and understood each other more. I wished that on what turned out to be our last anniversary, I had stayed home rather than flying with my kids to attend a bar mitzvah. And I wished that when we went for a hike that final morning in Mexico, I’d walked by Dave’s side and held his hand, instead of walking with Phil’s wife—my dear friend Marne. As I wrote out these moments, my anger and regret began to lessen.

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said that life can only be understood backward but it must be lived forward. Journaling helped me make sense of the past and rebuild my self-confidence to navigate the present and future. Then Adam suggested that I should also write down three things that I’d done well each day. At first I was skeptical. I was barely functioning; what moments of success could I find? *Got dressed today. Trophy please!* But there is evidence that these lists help by focusing us on what psychologists call “[small wins](#).” In one [experiment](#), people wrote down three things that went well and why every day for a week. Over the next six months, they became happier than a group writing about early memories. In a more recent [study](#), people spent five to ten minutes a day writing about things that went “really well” and why; within three weeks, their stress levels dropped, as did their mental and physical health complaints.

For six months, almost every night before I went to bed, I made my list. Since even the most basic tasks were hard, I started with those. *Made tea. Got through all of my emails. Went to work and focused for most of one meeting.* None of these were heroic accomplishments, but that little notebook by my bed served an important purpose. It made me realize that for my entire life I'd gone to bed thinking about what I'd done wrong that day, how I'd messed up, what wasn't working. Just the act of reminding myself of anything that had gone well was a welcome shift.

Making gratitude lists has helped me in the past, but this list served a different purpose. Adam and his colleague Jane Dutton **found** that counting our blessings doesn't boost our confidence or our effort, but counting our contributions can. Adam and Jane believe that this is because gratitude is passive: it makes us feel thankful for what we receive. Contributions are active: they build our confidence by reminding us that we can make a difference. I now encourage my friends and colleagues to write about what they have done well. The people who try it all come back with the same response: they wish they'd started doing this sooner.



## Post-traumatic growth

A traumatic experience is a seismic event that shakes our belief in a just world, robbing us of the sense that life is controllable, predictable, and meaningful. “When we are no longer able to change a situation,” psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl [observed](#), “we are challenged to change ourselves.”

In the early 2000s, psychology professors Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun were treating grieving parents and expected to see signs of devastation and post-traumatic stress, which they did. But they also found something surprising. The parents were all suffering and would have done anything to bring their children back. At the same time, many also described some positive outcomes in their lives following loss. It seems hard to believe, but as time passed, instead of post-traumatic stress, some of the parents [experienced](#) post-traumatic *growth*.

Psychologists went on to [study](#) hundreds of people who had endured [all kinds](#) of [trauma](#): victims of sexual [assault](#) and [abuse](#), [refugees](#) and [prisoners of war](#), and survivors of [accidents](#), [natural disasters](#), severe [injuries](#), and [illnesses](#). Many of these people experienced ongoing anxiety and depression. Still, along with these negative emotions there were some positive changes. Up to that point, psychologists had focused mostly on two possible outcomes of trauma. Some people struggled: they developed PTSD, faced debilitating depression and anxiety, or had difficulty functioning. Others were resilient: they bounced back to their state before the trauma. Now there was a third possibility: people who suffered could bounce *forward*.

Shockingly, one of the things that helped me the most was focusing on worst-case scenarios. During the early days of despair, my instinct was to try to find positive thoughts. Adam told me the opposite: that it was a good idea to think about how much worse things could be. “Worse?” I asked him. “Are you kidding me? How could this be worse?” His answer cut through me: “Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia driving your children.” *Wow*. The thought that I could have lost all three of them had never occurred to me. I instantly felt overwhelmingly grateful that my children were alive and healthy. That gratitude overtook some of the grief.

It is the irony of all ironies to experience tragedy and come out of it feeling more grateful. Since I lost Dave, I have at my fingertips this unbelievable reservoir of sadness. It’s right next to me where I can touch it—part of my daily life. But alongside that sadness, I have a much deeper appreciation for what I used to take for granted: family, friends, and simply being alive. My mom offered a helpful comparison. For sixty-six

years, she never thought twice about walking, but as she aged, her hip deteriorated and walking became painful. After hip replacement surgery four years ago, she feels grateful for every step she is able to take without pain. What she feels on a physical level, I feel on an emotional level. On the days that I'm okay, I now appreciate that I'm walking without pain.

We don't have to wait for special occasions to feel and show gratitude. In one of my favorite [studies](#), people were asked to write and deliver a thank-you note to someone who had shown them unusual kindness. This pleased the receivers but it also made the note writers feel significantly less depressed, and the gratitude afterglow stayed with them for a [month](#). When Adam shared this research with me, I realized why it works: in the moments I spend thanking my friends and family, my sadness is pushed into the background.

Tragedy can also motivate people to develop new and deeper relationships. Soldiers who experience significant losses during war are more likely to [have](#) friendships from their service forty years later. After heavy combat, they [value life more](#) and prefer to spend their time with people who share that understanding. Many breast cancer survivors report feeling [greater](#) intimacy with family and friends.

When people endure tragedies together or endure the same tragedy, it can fortify the bonds between them. They learn to trust each other, be vulnerable with each other, depend on each other. As the saying goes: "In prosperity our friends know us. In adversity we know our friends."

Another form of post-traumatic growth is finding greater meaning in life—a stronger sense of purpose rooted in a belief that one's existence has significance. In Viktor Frankl's [words](#), "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning."

Family and religion are the [greatest sources](#) of meaning for many people. But work can be another source of purpose. The jobs where people find the most meaning are often ones that serve [others](#). The roles of clergy, nurses, firefighters, addiction counselors, and kindergarten teachers can be stressful, but we rely on these often undercompensated professionals for health and safety, learning and growth. Adam has published five different studies demonstrating that meaningful work [buffers](#) against [burn-out](#). In companies, nonprofits, government, and the military, he finds that the more people believe their jobs help others, the [less emotionally exhausted](#) they feel at work and the [less depressed](#) they feel in life. And on [days](#) when people think they've had a

meaningful impact on others at work, they feel more energized at home and more capable of dealing with difficult situations.

Tedeschi and Calhoun found that after trauma, some people ended up choosing different directions for their lives that they never would have considered before. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, some Americans made dramatic changes in their careers. They joined fire departments, enlisted in the military, and entered the medical professions. Applications to Teach for America [tripled](#), and many of the aspiring teachers [said](#) their interest stemmed from 9/11. Those seeking a change wanted to use their precious time to contribute to something larger than themselves. Before the attacks, work might have been a job; [afterward](#), some wanted a calling. People were also [more likely](#) to find meaning after surviving a tornado, a mass shooting, or a plane crash if they believed they were going to die during the event. After being reminded of their mortality, [survivors](#) often re-examine their priorities, which in some cases results in growth. A brush with death can lead to new life.

Tragedy does more than rip away our present; it also tears apart our hopes for our future. Accidents [shatter people's dreams](#) of being able to support their families. Severe illnesses prevent people from finding work or love. Divorce erases future anniversaries (although I have a friend who celebrates her breakup each year). These profound shifts in self-perception are another secondary loss and a risk factor for [depression](#). Our [possible selves](#)—who we hoped to become—can be collateral damage.

Although it can be extremely difficult to grasp, the disappearance of one possible self can free us to imagine a new possible self. After tragedy, we sometimes miss these opportunities because we spend all of our emotional energy wishing for our old lives. As Helen Keller [put it](#), “When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.”

## Taking back joy

Allowing ourselves to be happy—accepting that it is okay to push through the guilt and seek joy—is a triumph over permanence. Having fun is a form of self-compassion; just as we need to be kind to ourselves when we make mistakes, we also need to be kind to ourselves by enjoying life when we can. Tragedy breaks down your door and takes you prisoner. To escape takes effort and energy. Seeking joy after facing adversity is taking back what was stolen from you. As U2 lead singer Bono [has said](#), “Joy is the ultimate act of defiance.”

One of the comments on my thirty-day Facebook post that affected me most deeply was from a woman named Virginia Schimpf Nacy. Virginia was happily married when her husband died suddenly in his sleep at age fifty-three. Six and a half years later, the night before her daughter’s wedding, Virginia’s son died of a heroin overdose. She insisted on going forward with the wedding and planned her son’s funeral the next day. Soon, Virginia was working with her local school district on a drug prevention program, joining forces with parents and counselors to create a grief support group, and advocating for legislative changes to fight addiction. She also looked for ways to counter her sadness. She started watching old Carol Burnett shows and went on a cross-country road trip with her chocolate Labrador to visit her daughter and son-in-law. “Both deaths are woven into the fabric of my life, but they’re not what define me,” she said. “Joy is very important to me. And I can’t count on joy to come from my daughter or anyone else. It has to come from me. It is time to kick the shit out of Option C.”

When we look for joy, we often focus on the big moments. Graduating from school. Having a child. Getting a job. Being reunited with family. But happiness is the frequency of [positive experiences](#), not the intensity. In a twelve-year [study](#) of bereaved spouses in Australia, 26 percent managed to find joy after loss as often as they had before. What set them apart was that they re-engaged in everyday activities and interactions.

“How we spend our days,” author Annie Dillard [writes](#), is “how we spend our lives.” Rather than waiting until we’re happy to enjoy the small things, we should go and do the small things that make us happy. After a depressing divorce, a friend of mine made a list of things she enjoyed—listening to musicals, seeing her nieces and nephews, looking at art books, eating flan—and made a vow to do one thing on the list after work each day. As blogger Tim Urban [describes it](#), happiness is the joy you find on hundreds of forgettable Wednesdays.

I decided to try having fun for my children—and *with* my children. Dave had loved playing Catan with our kids because it taught them to think ahead and anticipate opponents' moves. One afternoon, I took the game down from the shelf. I asked my kids matter-of-factly if they wanted to play. They did. In the past, I was always orange. My daughter was blue. My son was red. Dave was gray. When just the three of us sat down to play, my daughter pulled out the gray pieces. My son got upset and tried to take them away from her, insisting, "That was Daddy's color. You can't be gray!" I held his hand and said, "She can be gray. We take things back."

"We take it back" became our mantra. Rather than give up the things that reminded us of Dave, we embraced them and made them an ongoing part of our lives. We took back rooting for the teams that Dave loved: the Minnesota Vikings and the Golden State Warriors. We took back poker, which Dave had played with our kids since they were young. They laughed at the story about how one day Dave came home from work to find them playing poker *at ages five and seven* and said it was one of the proudest moments of his life. Chamath Palihapitiya, our friend who had played poker with Dave frequently and enthusiastically, stepped in to continue their Texas Hold'em education.

My New Year's resolution for 2016 was based on this idea. Each night, I was still trying to write down three things I had done well, but as my confidence returned, this seemed less necessary. Then Adam suggested a new idea: write down three moments of joy every day. Of all the New Year's resolutions I've ever made, this is the one I've kept the longest by far. Now nearly every night before I go to sleep, I jot down three happy moments in my notebook. Doing this makes me notice and appreciate these flashes of joy; when something positive happens, I think, *This will make the notebook*. It's a habit that brightens the whole day.

Paying attention to moments of joy takes effort because we are **wired** to focus on the negatives more than the positives. Bad events **tend to have** a stronger effect on us than good events. This made sense in prehistoric times: if you weren't haunted by the memory of the time someone you loved ate the poisonous berries, you might nibble on them yourself. But today we give that attention to ordinary setbacks and **daily hassles**. A broken windshield wiper or a coffee stain has the power to drag us down. We zero in on potential threats and miss opportunities to smile.

Just as labeling negative emotions can help us process them, labeling **positive emotions works too**. Writing about joyful experiences for just three days **can improve** people's moods and decrease their visits to health centers a full three months later. We can savor the smallest of daily events—how good a warm breeze feels or how delicious

French fries taste (especially when snatched from someone else's plate). My mom is one of the most optimistic people I know, and when she gets in bed each night she always spends a few moments being grateful for the comfort of the pillow under her head.

As we get older, we **define happiness** less in terms of excitement and more in terms of peacefulness. **Reverend** Veronica Goines sums this up as, "Peace is joy at rest, and joy is peace on its feet." Sharing positive events with another person also **increases** our own pleasant emotions over the next few days. In the **words** of Shannon Sedgwick Davis, a human rights advocate whose work requires her to deal with atrocities on a daily basis, "Joy is a discipline."

Along with taking things back, I looked for ways to move forward. I started small. My kids and I began playing hearts, a card game my grandfather taught me (and one I'm better at than poker). We began biking on weekends, which Dave couldn't do because it hurt his back. I started playing the piano again, something I hadn't done in thirty years. I play badly due to a lack of talent compounded by a lack of practice. Still, plinking out a song makes me feel better. "It gives me a smile," to paraphrase a Billy Joel song I play badly and sing off-key, "to forget about life for a while."

Playing music at the edge of our capabilities is what psychologists **call** a "just manageable difficulty." This level requires all of our attention, giving us no room to think about anything else. Many of us remember being happiest in **flow**—the state of total absorption in a task. When you're in a deep conversation with a friend and suddenly realize that two hours have flown by. When you take a road trip and the dashed line becomes a rhythm. When you're engrossed in reading a Harry Potter book and forget Hogwarts isn't real. *Total Muggle mistake*. But there's a catch. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who pioneered this research, found that people don't report being happy while they are in flow. They are so engaged that they only describe it as joyful afterward. Even trying to survey people about their flow states jolted them right out of it. *Good work, psychologists*.

Many turn to exercise for flow. After losing his wife, comedian Patton Oswalt noticed that comic books like Batman portrayed strange reactions to grief. In real life, "if Bruce Wayne watched his parents murdered at 9, he wouldn't become this buff hero," Oswalt **said**. "How about someone dies, and they just get fat and angry and confused? But no, immediately, they're at the gym." Actually hitting the gym—or just the pavement for a brisk walk—can be hugely beneficial. The **physical health effects** of exercise are well known, including lower risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, and

arthritis. Many doctors and therapists also [point to exercise](#) as one of the best ways to improve psychological well-being. For some adults over fifty who suffer from major depression, working out may even be [as effective](#) as taking an antidepressant.

Even when we're in great distress, joy can still be found in moments we seize and moments we create. Cooking. Dancing. Hiking. Praying. Driving. Singing Billy Joel songs off-key. All of these can provide relief from pain. And when these moments add up, we find that they give us more than happiness; they also give us strength.

## Community resilience

In 1972, a plane flying from Uruguay to Chile crashed into a mountain in the Andes, split in half, and barreled down a snowy slope. For the thirty-three survivors, this was just the beginning of an extraordinary ordeal. Over the next seventy-two days, the group battled shock, frostbite, avalanches, and starvation. Only sixteen of them made it out. *Alive*.

Thanks to the popular book and movie, many of us know the extreme measures taken by the group in order to survive. New analysis by Spencer Harrison—a researcher, mountain climber, and colleague of Adam’s—explains not just *how* these men survived, but *why*. Spencer tracked down four of the survivors, combed through their journals, and even visited the crash site with one of them. Every survivor’s story shared a common theme: a key to their resilience was hope.

Most of the forty-five people on board were rugby players in their late teens and early twenties traveling to an exhibition match. Damage to the plane’s radio meant they could not send communications, but they could still receive them. Their first plan was to wait for rescue in the shelter of the plane. “We all believed that rescue was our only chance of survival,” Nando Parrado [wrote](#), “and we clung to that hope with an almost religious zeal.” Nine days later, their supplies were depleted. The group was forced to turn to their only remaining source of food: the flesh from the frozen bodies of their teammates who had died. The next morning, a few of the passengers heard over the radio that the search had been called off. “We mustn’t tell them,” [said](#) the team captain. “At least let them go on hoping.” Another passenger, Gustavo Nicolich, disagreed. “Good news!” he shouted. “We’re going to get out of here on our own.”

We normally think of hope as something individuals hold in their heads and in their hearts. But people can build hope together. By creating a shared identity, individuals can form a group that has a past and a brighter future.

“Some people say, ‘If there’s life, there’s hope,’” survivor Roberto Canessa [explained](#). “But for us, it was the opposite: ‘If there’s hope, there’s life.’” During long, cold, and hungry days, the crash survivors prayed together. They planned projects to launch after returning to civilization: one passenger spoke of opening a restaurant, another dreamed of having a farm. Each night, two of the survivors looked at the moon and imagined that right then their parents were looking at the same moon. Another took pictures to record their plight. Many wrote letters to their families declaring their will to live. “To maintain faith at all times, despite our setbacks, we had to become alchemists,” survivor Javier Methol said. “Changing tragedy into a miracle, depression into hope.”



Of course hope by itself isn't enough. Many of the passengers had hope yet still lost their lives. But hope keeps people from giving in to despair. Researchers find that hope [springs up and persists](#) when “communities of people generate new images of possibility.” Believing in new possibilities helps people fight back against the idea of permanence and propels them to seek out new options; they find the [will and the way](#) to move forward. Psychologists call this “[grounded hope](#)”—the understanding that if you take action you can make things better. “I never stopped praying for the arrival of our rescuers, or for the intercession of God,” Parrado recalled. “But at the same time the cold-blooded voice that had urged me to save my tears was always whispering in the back of my mind: ‘No one will find us. We will die here. We must make a plan. We must save ourselves.’”

Parrado and Canessa set out on a trek with a third survivor and nearly froze to death before locating the tail of the plane, which contained insulation that they turned into a sleeping bag. Nearly two months after the crash, this makeshift sleeping bag allowed Parrado and Canessa to launch another expedition. They hiked thirty-three miles across treacherous terrain, scaling a 14,000-foot peak. After ten days, they spotted a man on horseback. The fourteen other survivors were rescued by helicopter.

The community formed by the *Alive* survivors has stayed close for decades. Each year they gather on the anniversary of their rescue to play rugby. Together they contributed to a book about their experience, *La Sociedad de la Nieve—The Snow Society*. And in 2010, when thirty-three miners were trapped underground in Chile, four of the Andes survivors [flew in from Uruguay to address](#) the miners by [video](#). “We’ve come to give them a little faith and hope,” Gustavo Servino said at the time. “To say we’re at their service if they need us for anything. And above all, to give support to the families outside.” After sixty-nine days, the first miner was lifted to the surface in a capsule while hundreds cheered. It took a full day, but all thirty-three miners were rescued and reunited with their loved ones. The tent city where everyone gathered above the mine was called Campamento Esperanza (Camp Hope).

Resilience is not just built in individuals. It is built *among* individuals—in our neighborhoods, schools, towns, and governments. When we build resilience together, we become stronger ourselves and form communities that can overcome obstacles and prevent adversity. Collective resilience requires more than just shared hope—it is also fueled by shared experiences, shared narratives, and shared power.

In June 2015, the month after Dave died, a white supremacist gunned down a senior pastor and eight parishioners during their Wednesday Bible study at Emanuel African

Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I was reeling from my own loss, and seeing such senseless violence sank me deeper into despair.

Then I heard about the congregation's response. That week, relatives of the victims went to court to address the gunman who had murdered their loved ones. One by one they rejected his hatred. "You took something very precious away from me," [said](#) Nadine Collier, whose mother was killed. "I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. . . . You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you." Instead of being consumed by hatred, the church members chose forgiveness, which allowed them to come together and stand against racism and violence. Four days after the shooting, the church doors opened for regular Sunday service. Five days later, President Barack Obama spoke at the funeral of Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney and led the congregation in singing "Amazing Grace."

"Mother Emanuel," as the church is known, is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the South. Its congregations have [endured](#) laws forbidding black worship, a white mob burning down their building, and an earthquake. After every tragedy, they came together to rebuild, sometimes literally and always emotionally. As Reverend Joseph Darby, the presiding elder for a neighboring district, told us, "Their extension of grace is rooted in a long-standing coping mechanism passed down from people who had no option in many cases but to forgive and move on while still leaving the door open for justice to be done. It takes you past raw vengeance. Forgiveness clears your head to pursue justice."

On the Sunday after the 2015 shooting, church bells around the city tolled at ten a.m. for nine minutes—one minute for each victim. "What unites us is stronger than what divides us," pronounced Jermaine Watkins, a pastor from a local church. "To hatred, we say no way, not today. To racism, we say no way, not today. To division, we say no way, not today. To reconciliation, we say yes. To loss of hope, we say no way, not today. To a racial war, we say no way, not today. . . . Charleston, together, we say no way, not today." As the community began picking up the pieces, area churches started hosting [conferences](#) on preventing violence. After the FBI [determined](#) that a system breakdown had allowed the shooter to purchase a gun, families who had been affected by gun violence [joined forces](#) with church and political leaders to advocate for more rigorous background checks.

We can work to prevent violence and racism but many forms of adversity can't be avoided. Loss. Accidental injury. Natural disasters. In [2010 alone](#), there were approximately four hundred natural disasters worldwide that claimed about 300,000

lives and affected millions. Some of the responses to these disasters show us that shared hope, experiences, and narratives can light the spark of collective resilience. But for the fire to be sustained we need shared power—the resources and authority to shape our own destiny.

Resilient communities have strong social ties—bonds between people, bridges between groups, and links to local leaders. I observed the importance of these local ties when I worked at the World Bank on leprosy eradication in India decades ago. Because of historic stigma, leprosy patients often fail to seek treatment, allowing their disease to progress and spread to others. When health workers visited villages to identify people with leprosy, they were rebuffed; the local people did not trust these outsiders, and women especially were reluctant to show spots on their skin to strangers. The health workers needed to find another approach. They convinced village leaders to run early detection programs themselves. The leaders held community meetings and recruited local nonprofits and citizens to perform plays showing that anyone coming forward with early symptoms would not be ostracized but would receive treatment and care.

This work made me acutely aware that even the most heroic examples of individual resilience can be inadequate in the face of poverty and untreated illness. When people with leprosy were kicked out of their villages, no amount of individual resilience could have helped them. It was not until the community began treating leprosy patients rather than banishing them that people could recover and survive.

Empowering communities builds collective resilience. After the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, psychologists went to refugee camps in Tanzania to provide mental health care. They **found** that treating individuals was less effective than strengthening the community's ability to support vulnerable groups. The camps with the greatest resilience were **organized like villages**, with councils, meeting spaces for teenagers to hang out, soccer fields, entertainment venues, and places for worship. Instead of having outsiders in authority roles, the Rwandans led according to their cultural traditions. Self-organization provided order and built shared power.

We find our humanity—our will to live and our ability to love—in our connections to one another. Just as individuals can find post-traumatic growth and become stronger, so can communities. You never know when your community will need to call on that strength, but you can be sure that someday it will.

When their plane crashed in the Andes, the rugby teammates had already built solidarity and trust. Early on they looked to the team captain for guidance. When he didn't make it, they maintained confidence in one another. "We all have our own personal Andes," Nando Parrado wrote long after the expedition with Roberto Canessa that led to their rescue. Canessa added, "One of the things that was destroyed when we crashed into the mountain was our connection to society. But our ties to one another grew stronger every day."

# Option **B**

We invite you to visit [optionb.org](https://optionb.org) to learn more about building resilience and navigating life's challenges. You can read stories of people who have faced loss, illness, and other hardships, and find information that will help you and your loved ones in this difficult time. We also hope you'll join the Option B community at [facebook.com/optionbcommunity](https://facebook.com/optionbcommunity) and [instagram.com/optionb](https://instagram.com/optionb) for ongoing encouragement.

If you would like to learn more about resilience, you can purchase a complete copy of Option B on [Amazon](https://amazon.com).