

Resilience Through A Lifetime of Change

Brenda J. DeMotte, MSW, LICSW

A Cherokee Parable

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt and ego. The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

“This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old chief simply replied, “The one you feed.”

– Ancient source, name unknown, handed down by word of mouth

Life is subject to change without notice. What determines how well we emotionally and physically bounce back from that unpredictability is called resilience. Resilience, like a muscle of the body requires regular activity to make it flexible and strong. Even during times of great grief moments of resilience can be practiced with considerable ease.

Consider, if you will, some of the elements of resilience.

Gratitude

The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation and to return kindness. The benefits of gratitude are nearly endless. People who regularly practice gratitude by taking time to reflect upon the things they are thankful for experience more positive emotions, feel more alive, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems. Robert Emmons, author of *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, shows that simply by keeping a gratitude journal—regularly writing brief reflections on moments for which we are thankful—can significantly increase well-being and life satisfaction.

Gratitude journaling works because it slowly changes the way we perceive situations by adjusting our focus. How

can we keep our motivation up to make gratitude journaling a regular exercise?

Freshen up your thanks

Notice new things you are grateful for every day. Get specific: “My sister invited me to dinner so I didn’t have to cook.” “My husband gave me a shoulder rub when he knew I was really stressed.” Open your eyes to the world around you. Make a game out of noticing new things each day.

Be social about your gratitude practice

Our relationship with others is the greatest determinant of our happiness. So, it makes sense to think of other people as we build our gratitude. Robert Emmons suggests that focusing our gratitude on people for whom we’re thankful, rather than circumstance or material items, will enhance the benefits we experience. Consider an activity of writing a gratitude letter to someone who had an impact on you whom you’ve never properly thanked. You could also share the day’s grateful moment at the dinner table. The conversations that follow may give you even more reasons to give thanks.

Forgiveness

Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate

decision to release feelings of resentment and thoughts of revenge. When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge—or embrace forgiveness and move forward. If you don’t practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays more dearly. Mayo Clinic’s newsletter, written by clinic staff, suggest by embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

What are the benefits of forgiving someone?

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual & psychological well-being
- Less anxiety, stress & hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Higher self esteem

How do I reach a state of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. To begin you might:

- Consider the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time.



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- Reflect on the facts of the situation, how you've reacted, and how this combination has affected your life, health, and well-being.
- Actively choose to forgive the person who has offended you, when you're ready.
- Move away from your role as victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life.

As you let go of grudges, you'll no longer define your life by how you've been hurt. You might even find compassion and understanding.

Get Out in the Great Outdoors

As humans become less connected with nature, we lose an essential health buffer. There is mounting evidence that contact with nature has significant positive impacts on our mental health. (Mardie Townsent, PhD, Deakin University, Australia)

It is associated with reduced levels of stress, increased resilience, improved self-esteem, and increased ability to engage socially.

The benefits can be found not only by being immersed in nature, like in the woods or park, but also by looking out the window at natural scenes and even simply looking at photos of them. Newer research suggests that the more awe-inspiring the scene, the better.

The sounds of nature appear to have similar "mind relaxing" benefits. Hearing recorded sounds from nature have significant effects on recovery from a stressful situation. As for time in the outdoors, researchers from Nippon Medical School in Japan found that "forest bathing," as they call it, not only reduced stress but actually increased the natural killer cells of the immune system and the expression of anti-cancer proteins.

Helping Others

In a nutshell, if you want to cope better with stress, serve others. In a newly released research study from the University of British Columbia, Professor Lara Aknin found stress management and resilience can be enhanced by connecting with others in need. When you have a sense of how others live (not Hollywood celebrities or some of your peers), you have a better perspective on life, as well as on the hassles and challenges of your own life. You experience more empathy, compassion, and solidarity with others as well.

The research also found that volunteerism (defined as two hours per week over many years) reduces mortality rates by 40 percent.

So, if you want to manage stress better and be more resilient, think about giving back by helping others in need. You'll probably get more than you can possibly give if you do so. And you'll likely be happier to boot.

Summary

Resilience doesn't just happen. To create and maintain the abundance of physical, spiritual, relational and mental well-being, we must actively engage in the elements that build our resilience muscles. So, the next time the wolves of life are howling at your door, which one will you choose to feed?

Editor's Note: Brenda J. DeMotte grew up in a small farming community in southwestern, North Dakota. As a teenager she began working at the local funeral home. This work was the inspiration for her to become a funeral director/mortician, and ultimately, a psychotherapist specializing in grief and the psychology of change. Her past career in funeral service and present work as a grief therapist and psychotherapist, has brought her in contact with people facing the loss of a significant person, job, body image, geographic location, health or

pet. Besides a Master's degree in Social Work, she holds degrees in Grief Therapy and Mortuary Science. At the University of Minnesota, where she received her Master's Degree, she participated in research studies involving children, bonding, and loss. Her broad knowledge and practical applications of the information has created a demand for her to speak to public and professional groups about the topics of change, loss and grief. Brenda was the founder and director of Professional Counseling & Grief Services, Inc., where she maintained a general practice while specializing in grief and complicated bereavement. Today she is a professional speaker and educator on grief who most recently authored *Grief Demystified*, a book on this broad and universal topic. See a review on page 8.

Book Reviews—

Grief Demystified: A Companion Through Change and Notes to Self

By Brenda J. DeMotte Reviewed by Chris Lewis

There is a wise helper in our midst. Brenda J. DeMotte, MSW, LICSW, is based just south of the Twin Cities in Apple Valley MN. She has spent her entire adult life guiding the bereaved, first as a funeral director, then as a therapist for many years specializing in grief, and most recently as a speaker on that topic.

Now Ms. DeMotte has added a new and easily accessible dimension to her care of grieving people, a recently published book titled *Grief Demystified: A Companion Through Change*.

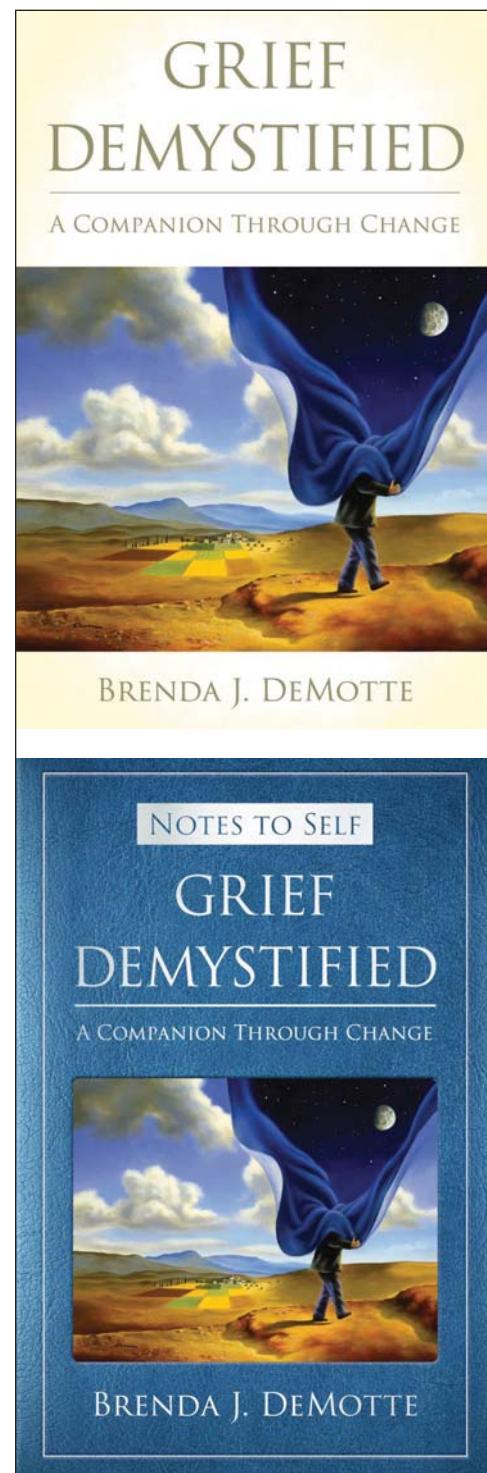
Cleverly and helpfully, the author has at the same time published a notebook-format journal with the same cover art and title as the main book but headed by the label *Notes to Self*. This interesting addition mirrors the larger book, devoting one page to each corresponding chapter, with a one-paragraph summary of each chapter and room for readers to jot personal notes under several relevant questions. This smaller journal, while meant to enhance the usefulness of the parent book, also could be very effective on its own, especially for those who prefer writing and self-exploration over in-depth reading.

Even the main book is noteworthy for its efficiency and ease of use,

important for grieving readers who so often are low on energy, patience and concentration. There is no extended narrative to follow. The longest chapter is nine pages and most are much shorter. Each chapter succinctly and compassionately discusses some aspect of living through loss; the author deliberately includes the grief of non-death losses. Individual readers can find guidance for their particular concerns by turning to specific chapters.

Clearly Ms. DeMotte knows this topic, like a trail guide who intimately knows the woods. She states the book reflects her own loss experiences but especially what she's learned by "accompanying individuals as they found their way through life changes initiated by loss," and it shows. No pat advice or simplistic explanations here; what comes through is the uniqueness of each griever's path.

Throughout these two books, one will find hope and encouragement, tempered (as glass is tempered to prevent shattering) by realism. For example, anyone who has ever reacted negatively to the word "closure" will be validated by the final chapter of this practical, reassuring, difference-making book. It's one of the few out there that really should be placed, along with a hug, into the hands of those who mourn.



"As you make your way through the chaos of grief, holding your desire for knowledge before you like a lantern in the dark, it can be helpful to recognize common misconceptions about grief. Your own lived experience will teach you more than anything you have heard about what grief is supposed to look like or feel and how long it is supposed to last. If you can bring a questioning mind to all you hear about grief, you may more easily surrender to its turbulence." – Brenda J. DeMotte