



# Resilience: Sustaining One's Inner-Being

Lucien Latulippe, MD, FRCPC

Resilience can be defined as the ability of a person, or group, to develop in a healthy manner and to project oneself into the future—to effect a veritable metamorphosis—despite destabilizing elements, difficult living conditions, or acute trauma. Thus, resilience is a capacity that results from a dynamic and evolving process, during which the severity of the trauma may exceed a person's resources. It is never absolute, total, or acquired. Moreover, an individual may be able to cope with some situations, yet remain completely destabilized in others.<sup>1</sup> The outcome depends upon the individual's life stage and his/her physical or psychologic condition at the time of emotional shock.

How, despite extreme situations, do some manage to rebound and move forward, while others fail and literally go to pieces when con-

fronted with adversity? Gustave-Nicolas Fisher, author of *Le ressort invisible*,<sup>2</sup> attempted to understand the essence of extreme situations, to truly capture what these individuals experience. During an interview with *Le Devoir*, he noted that when people are confronted with death, the event acts as a revelation—a revelation of how much they can endure. Therefore, those who do not let themselves be beaten, trigger an invisible spring which gives them the energy to rebound. Each extreme situation, says Fisher, paradoxically encompasses a potential for life.<sup>3</sup>

We have all experienced extreme or destabilizing situations. Afterwards, how did we manage to return to our normal daily activities? How, despite the adversity, did we rebound and recapture the ability to lead a successful life?

As Fisher states, the shock manifests itself as a revelation. According to Boris Cyrulnik, the act of saying to oneself, "What am I going to do about my injury?" inspires the person to discover the healthy parts of himself and go in search of any available support. Since it constitutes an

---

**Lucien Latulippe, MD, FRCPC**  
Professor of medicine,  
department of rheumatology,  
Centre Hospitalier de l'Université Laval,  
Sainte-Foy, Quebec

extreme and destabilizing situation, it brings about a complete break with the person's past state. This shock is not itself a state; on the contrary, it is a complex process that constitutes an emotional response wherein the individual confronts the event from the beginning. This phase leads to a transition, (*i.e.*, the upending of one life state and movement towards another).<sup>2</sup>

The following are three real-life demonstrations of resilience. I am convinced you could think of a large number of similar cases, particularly involving chronic diseases (*e.g.*, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, various nervous-system disorders). The same is true for cases of mistreatment, social isolation, poverty, and potentially fatal diseases such as cancer. In these instances, we speak of resilience in an individual, group, or within a family.

### *A young man's ordeal*

A recent edition of the Radio-Canada news program *Téléjournal* told the story of a young Iraqi boy who had to have both arms amputated following a bombing, during which he also lost both his brother and parents.

Now living in London, England, he is receiving psychosocial support and the help of a charitable organization, while he learns the complex functioning of his artificial limbs. The report concluded with his edifying remark, *"I want to become an engineer, so that I can help the victims of similar acts."*

His story is especially moving: despite all these obstacles and great adversity, he resolved to live and make some sense out of the barbarous and destabilizing act he endured.

*"I want to help the victims of similar acts so that they have the chance to live and lead successful lives."*

### *A woman's trauma*

On March 25, 1979, an airplane crash near the Quebec City airport killed 14 people. One of the seven survivors, Johanne DeMontigny, carried on to become a psychologist, with the personal goal of assisting accident victims and victims of similar traumatic events overcome the adversity and go on living their lives. She is also a psychologist at McGill University's palliative-care centre

Ms. DeMontigny's career, was well underway at the time of the plane crash. Twenty-five years later, she says her greatest accomplishment is not her career, but rather the interpersonal relationships that have enabled her to achieve her life goal.

Despite enormous physical and psychological suffering, Ms. DeMontigny summoned the necessary strength to achieve a remarkable accomplishment.

In a recent interview she declared, *"I am satisfied with my life, with the choices I have made, with my achievements. For me, it's not a matter of career or money but of successful relationships."*<sup>4</sup>

Having been one of her students, I can attest to this woman's remarkable and noble achievements.

### *A family in crisis*

In the course of my medical practice, I learned the remarkable story of a family whose father died before the age of 40, leaving behind a pregnant wife and nine children.

After her husband died, the woman's brother had, in a gesture of solidarity and self-sacrifice, acted as a father figure.

A few years later, the third eldest child died of pancreatic cancer. And, as one tragedy often leads to another, the mother herself died of cra-

nial trauma at 53.

When we assess this family's situation, we see highly positive results: the nine surviving children have all gone through university or vocational school and are doing well.

The uncle's magnanimity was able to create a special dynamic within the family that gave each member the ability and freedom to move ahead and lead successful lives.

What I find admirable in all three cases is the giving of oneself and the love for others. The young Iraqi aspires to become an engineer in order to improve the construction and functioning of prostheses. Ms. DeMontigny became a psychologist, has accomplished great things and has contributed enormously to society. And the uncle, who cared and provided for his sister's family, acted with openness and generosity as he encouraged and inspired his nine

young nieces and nephews.

In the metamorphosis process, the resilient person chooses his or her priorities and life goals. These life goals, such as being fully committed to the present, and the ongoing nourishing and sustaining of one's inner-being, involve values far more solid than material values.

Resilient individuals proclaim, "I want to live!" They have the inner capacity to live happy and successful lives, lives which often involve self-sacrifice.

As Pascal Quignard points out, each one of us has one life to live—a life which should not be wasted with feeble attempts at loving. It is the one and only opportunity we have to love.<sup>5</sup> [CME](#)

References

1. Téléjournal, Le Point, Radio-Canada, March 17, 2004.
2. Fisher GN: Le Ressort Invisible, Vive l'Extrême, October 1994.
3. Fisher GN: Le Devoir interview, December 27, 1999.
4. DeMontigny J: Le Soleil interview, April 3, 2004.
5. Quignard P: Vie Secrète, Editions Gallimard 1992, 9-486.

Copyright © 2004 and published by STA Communications Inc., 955 boulevard St-Jean, Suite 306, Pointe Claire, QC H9R 5K3. Published 12 times per year. Subscription: \$102.00 annually; single copy \$8.50; \$10.75 elsewhere. Canada Post — Canadian Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No.: 40063348. Postage paid at St-Laurent, Quebec. All rights reserved. None of the contents of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. ISSN 0843-994X. Cover: Université Laval.

**Remember This...**

Remembering is difficult... but even more difficult if you have Alzheimer Disease. A disease, which affects the brain, erases memory, and eventually takes life itself.

The Alzheimer Society provides information, support and funds research into the cause and cure. To find out more contact your local Alzheimer Society.

[www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)  
Help for Today. Hope for Tomorrow.

**Alzheimer Society**

*Handwritten notes on the hand:*  
- The Alzheimer Society helps those living with the disease and their families. The Alzheimer Society helps people with Alzheimer Disease. Alzheimer Disease can affect people in their 40s and 50s.  
- The Alzheimer Society has tips, coping strategies and support groups.  
- By 2031, the number will be 750,000.  
- I'm 75 years old. I have Alzheimer's disease.  
- Alzheimer Disease is like an thief. It steals your memory.  
- The Alzheimer Society helps those living with the disease and their families. The Alzheimer Society helps people with Alzheimer Disease. Alzheimer Disease can affect people in their 40s and 50s.  
- The Alzheimer Society has tips, coping strategies and support groups.  
- By 2031, the number will be 750,000.  
- I'm 75 years old. I have Alzheimer's disease.  
- Alzheimer Disease is like an thief. It steals your memory.  
- The Alzheimer Society helps those living with the disease and their families. The Alzheimer Society helps people with Alzheimer Disease. Alzheimer Disease can affect people in their 40s and 50s.