

Helping Others Cope With and Endure Adversity

By Henry S. Givray

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Typing “adversity” in the books section of Amazon.com yields more than 1,200 hits. Titles include “Using Adversity as Motivation to Achieve Your Goals and Find Success in Life,” “The Common Thread of Overcoming Adversity” and “Living Your Dreams and Turning Adversity into Opportunity.” These self-help books posit that as individuals we can learn from, find meaning in and derive motivation from challenges, setbacks and trying times. And, as a result, we can emerge stronger, more confident and more able to create opportunities and achieve success.

But what if the adversity you are facing is a traumatic, high-stakes, negative event that impacts other people in your life more than it does you? By “other people” I refer to loved ones, or those you care about and are responsible for in your personal or professional life. Here the self-help books offer little because your focus is not on yourself but rather others. Specifically, your primary goal is to help them cope with and endure the adversity, and do all that you can to create the conditions for a better tomorrow.

In December 2014, my wife Jannine was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. The news was devastating. The past 12 months have entailed long hospital stays, multiple rounds of intense chemotherapy, a battery of grueling tests, a complex stem cell transplant procedure with severe side-effects, a litany of drugs, and countless varied and unpleasant reactions to all of the above. The emotional pain of seeing and knowing what Jannine is going through is hard to bear and at times can bring me to my knees. I would trade places with her in a heartbeat.

To help me do my best for Jannine and my family, and for my SmithBucklin colleagues, I looked to the true meaning of leadership for inspiration and guidance. The following six principles and their corresponding actions are drawn from my life-long passion and learning around the qualities, behaviors and practices that distinguish true leaders. My hope is that they may be useful to you in helping others in your life confront and deal with adversity.

1. Be all in with a full heart

This is as much about attitude as it is about action. “All in” means that regardless of normal or unexpected pressures and priorities in other aspects of your life you are 100 percent present, willing and able to do whatever it takes to help others cope, bring them comfort, lessen their burden, offer them relief and help create the conditions for a better tomorrow.

Always. No excuses. “With a full heart” means you genuinely have no regrets, no second-guessing, no resentments, no equivocating and no feeling sorry for yourself.

2. Focus on the things that only you can do

A former president of a client association gave me some advice when I was in my early thirties that has had a profound effect on my thinking in all areas of life. He said to have the greatest impact on others, as well as achieve enduring success, you must focus on the things that only you can do as defined by your role, responsibilities, obligations and particular skills or unique circumstances – both professionally and personally. In other words, you must never delegate, defer or dismiss the things that only you can do. Rather, you must prioritize them above all else. During the past year, focusing on the things that only I could do as CEO – and having a talented and cohesive management team – gave me the freedom, flexibility and peace of mind to devote whatever time I needed to be fully present with Jannine without having to compromise, radically change or relinquish my CEO responsibilities.

3. Replenish your energy

Time is finite, but energy can be expanded and regularly renewed. The key is to first know the type of renewal strength you need, whether it is mental, physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Then identify your sources of needed energy, which could be a place of beauty and serenity, physical exercise, quiet moments of reflection, a type of music, joyous memories, family time, conversation with a special someone, or a specific set of activities. Most importantly, tap into your sources of energy with discipline and relentless commitment not only when needed but also in preparation of what is ahead. Working on the two leadership learning programs I created and facilitate gives me energy and renews me mentally and emotionally. I knew how important it was for me to continue my work with these programs this past year not in spite of some of the most trying times dealing with Jannine’s illness, but rather precisely because of them.

4. Offer hope

When I was 14 I was diagnosed with cancer. Doctors gave me little chance of surviving past nine months. My mom, always smiling and in good cheer, would continually reference the future in countless and varied ways. Seeing my mom ‘up’ bolstered my spirits and gave me hope and strength.





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Without a doubt, her abiding optimism had a profound impact on my recovery. Reflecting on my mom’s actions, I learned that confronting difficulties and hardships while maintaining an optimistic frame-of-mind with courage and conviction can lift spirits, give hope and build strength in others. Moreover, it is often the difference in creating the conditions for a better tomorrow. I strive each and every day to model my mom’s actions and behaviors in my role as husband and primary caregiver to Jannine.

5. Communicate incessantly with meticulous clarity and context

Our brains are naturally conditioned to be influenced by, dwell on and recall negative experiences – bad news, traumatic events, unpleasant thoughts, perceived impending peril – far more than neutral or positive ones. Moreover, when faced with vagueness, our brains are wired to think the worst. Psychologists refer to this as the negativity bias, which actually helped our primitive ancestors stay alive. Adversity expands and intensifies the negativity bias. You can help mitigate it in others by communicating incessantly with meticulous clarity and context.

During this past year, Jannine and I have been meeting several times per week with her physicians and their teams to discuss, analyze, explain and review a myriad of topics related to Jannine’s illness including prognosis, treatment options, current status, future plans, drugs and side-effects, among many other items. Knowing that a cancer patient’s negativity bias is particularly heightened, I found myself probing, prodding and asking question after question – always pushing for clarity and context. That prepared me to have discussions with Jannine, wherever and whenever needed, to correct possible misconceptions, fill in information blanks, reinforce key positive points, provide additional context, clarify misunderstandings, offer different but credible and more positive points-of-view, uncover issues requiring further investigation, and share hopeful and empowering stories and anecdotes. When it comes to family, friends and colleagues who love and deeply care about Jannine, I send them periodic, comprehensive written updates. These updates not only help alleviate their concerns and anxiety of not knowing, they also provide relief for Jannine in not having to respond to similar questions of genuine concern multiple times.

6. Keep the desired future outcome firmly in the forefront

Certainly, adversity journeys include both good and bad days. Good news and tangible progress produce relief, reassurance and hope. Setbacks and unfavorable predictions evoke angst, worry and fear. And in-between, the waiting and unknown can add anxiety, nervousness and distress to the mix. You cannot eliminate the natural reactions and

emotions of others dealing with adversity. But you can bring relief and provide comfort by helping them celebrate the small wins, enjoy the good days to their fullest and lessen the effects of the bad days through both encouraging words and dogged reminders that better ones will come again. Doing so keeps the desired future outcome firmly in the forefront, always in play and always in sight. This not only makes them and you feel better, it also keeps the truth of hope both present and powerful.

Because of Jannine’s emotional and physical strength, determination and fighting spirit, the depth of love, care and adoration that surround her, and our Jedi-team of physicians and healthcare professionals, we remain hopeful and optimistic that although the journey is long and arduous Jannine will emerge from this dreadful ordeal with her leukemia in permanent remission.

Adversity is a fact of life and its triggering events are often unforeseen and unplanned. Though you cannot control their timing, severity or length, you do have 100 percent control on how you respond to them. By embodying the six principles above and putting into play actions that reflect them, you can make a meaningful difference in the lives of others by helping them cope with and endure adversity. You will also have the means and the opportunity to create the conditions for their better tomorrows. •

On June 2, 2016, 18 months after being diagnosed, Jannine passed away. Even with the help of a powerful antibiotic drug, Jannine’s severely compromised immune system could not suppress the growth of a deadly lung fungal infection. That day I lost the love of my life, my life partner, and my best friend who also happened to be an extraordinary human being. Though the pain of losing Jannine was devastating and left a hole in my life that can never be filled, she is always be with me. Through her countless acts of kindness, grace, elegance, and genuine care, Jannine touched so many in deep and enduring ways while leaving forever footprints on their hearts.

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.