How a new outlook can help us cope — even thrive — in adversity

BY SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY

It's hard to avoid bad news about the economy. Financial markets are collapsing, an unprecedented number of homes are in foreclosure, billionaires are begging for handouts and people are losing jobs. But despite everything, many of us have a remarkable capacity to maintain optimism, confidence and even some cheer — about ourselves and the world around us.

"Coping" is the process by which we manage to survive — and even thrive — in the face of stress, trauma and adversity. It's how we assuage the hurt, anxiety or suffering of a negative event. From an enormous literature in psychology on what makes for effective coping, the following two are my favorite findings:

First, successful coping involves constraining some kind of benefit from an ordeal or trauma. Researchers have found that the most well-adjusted people are able to find some value — such as a change in life perspective, a feeling that life is of greater worth, or a sense of personal growth — in a loss or negative life event. For example, a musician who had gained fame and fortune as a folk-rock star abruptly lost everything — his band, his house, and then his marriage. Yet he considered himself lucky, and grateful, for his love of music and his children. "I had it, the money and fame," he said, "and now I don't, but my happiness level is the same."

BANK ON INNER STRENGTH

A classic study by UCLA Professor Shelley Taylor found that women coping with breast cancer have amazing strengths. When interviewed, many of these women spoke of their illness as a wake-up call — something that galvanized them to reorder their priorities and to recognize what was truly important in life (a common insight was family over work), of devoting more time to their closest relationships and to spend less time on things such as housework. Similarly, those of us whose work hours have been cut might write that long-forgotten "great American novel," start hint watching, partake in outdoor family activities, or learn to sew or fix things around the house to save money.

Some people who have experienced hardships and losses claim that their relationships have benefited — that their friendships and intimate partnerships are more profound, significant, and meaningful after the trauma than before. Still others, researchers find, report that they have grown enormously in the wake of their negative experience, discovering a maturity and strength of character that they didn't know they possessed.

For example, after losing her home, a single mother was forced to move into close quarters with her brother's family and discovered, to her surprise, a renewed appreciation of the preciousness of life and the goodness of her family members.

A second successful coping method fosters personal growth and even transformation. Researchers have accumulated evidence supporting Friedrich Nietzsche's familiar adage:
HAPPY

The experience of pain, loss and trauma can make us stronger, or at least, lead us to believe that we are stronger and more resourceful than we had thought.

Some psychologists argue that finding benefit in a trauma represents a true personal transformation. When you consider it, a major loss can launch a person into new roles and novel situations. After her husband is laid off, a woman who has always been financially dependent may be abruptly catapulted into learning numerous, assorted skills. She may be startled to find herself rising to the occasion and accomplishing things that she never judged herself capable of doing, such as going on job interviews, learning a trade or calculating her taxes. This can certainly lead to new self-views, enhanced self-esteem and even growth.

TRANSFORMATION?

Indeed, trauma survivors often report transformative experiences. Some gain renewed confidence in their ability to endure and prevail. Others experience improved relationships after discovering whom they can really count on. Others still begin to feel more comfortable with intimacy and acquire a heightened sense of compassion for others who suffer. Finally, some come to develop a deeper, more sophisticated, and more satisfying philosophy of life. Psychologists say that people who face a major challenge, such as a foreclosure, a switch to a less fulfilling job, or an illness without health insurance, can take one of three potential paths: survival, recovery or thriving. Survival essentially translates to an impairment of functioning. A person who is merely "surviving" is someone who has lost much happiness and the desire to enjoy love, work or play. A person in "recovery" has suffered in the aftermath of a major stress, perhaps losing the capacity to work productively or have satisfying relationships for a period of time, but eventually returns to his or her original state. Finally, "thriving" is the result for a person who has experienced a crisis, yet rises above his or her original state! This person has experienced a transformation.

How can we thrive — let alone survive or recover — in the face of the severe hardships and stresses that life not infrequently throws us? How do we remain upbeat in the face of gloomy bad news about the economy? It is not easy. For some people and in some situations, it may not even be possible. But for most of us, it's within reach.