When most Americans are asked to define “healthy living,” the first thing that generally comes to mind is a lifestyle conducive to sustainable physical health, e.g., good nutrition and diet, exercise, non-toxic environments, etc. Professional helpers also propagate factors related to social and community life that uphold emotional well-being: healthy attitudes, boundaries, communication, relationships, balance between work and life, etc. These are undoubtedly important, and I certainly include them as relevant components in my own list of protective factors that promote optimal functioning.

On the other hand, an aspect of healthy living that is less conventionally discussed in today’s 24/7 news cycle and social media postings is the ability for people to live resiliently. As noted by resilience expert Froma Walsh, when most people think of resilience, they think of the ability to return back to a previous level of equilibrium following a crisis, when things were somehow better. However, while such a concept has pleasant connotations, it does not account for the fact that something has happened that involves a call to action. Often that “something” involves tragedy, and other times it involves being forced by circumstances to change our customary outlook or behavior. Either way, both tragedy and change are inevitable in life, and both entail degrees of necessary suffering— and attempts to evade suffering only create more suffering for ourselves and others. On the other hand, at their best, both tragedy and change can bring miraculous levels of personal growth that inspire growth in others. Therein lies the more genuine meaning of resilience, which refers to the ability “to suffer well” and courageously, and thus to progress toward a more inclusive worldview, to be able to forgive, to be able to say “I had to go through that to get to where I am now.”

Sounds simple, right? Unfortunately, what is most simple often is also what is most difficult. The hard work that genuine forgiveness and growth entail is not always supported in mainstream American culture (e.g., some regard it as too idealistic, others as unmanly, and still others as bad for business). We live in a society in which distractions abound to keep our focus away from that hard work and to reinforce our avoidance of more difficult emotions like boredom, emptiness and loneliness as well as of developing the courage to be wrong.

Accordingly, healthy resilience as part of healthy living necessarily involves a sea change in how we approach emotions. While the conventional American view of emotions is to categorize them as positive and negative, a more realistic perspective may be to view all emotions as inherently encompassing constructive and destructive qualities, as well as being interdependent. For instance, we all know the problematic consequences of uncontrolled fear or anger. On the other hand, fear also can cue our awareness to make necessary changes in our lives, and without righteous anger Martin Luther King, Jr. could not have improvised his seminal “I Have a Dream” speech. Likewise, while it certainly would be convenient to live out the illusory reverie of a stress-free, happy life, as depicted in the 2015 film Inside Out, without sadness, joy cannot exist.

One of the most fulfilling questions we can ask ourselves to spark healthy resilience is, “What does the [insert negative emotion here] want?” It is not an easy process, but the more we allow ourselves to sit with suffering, the more we can identify how much we squander energy and time in our attempts to distract ourselves from inconvenient or uncomfortable emotional experiences. This enables a sense of clarity that is conducive to realizations that we are simply worrying or doubting or judging. When the process goes well, this results in an improved ability to simplify our lives, and in turn, the ability to creatively transform that suffering into something worthwhile. At its best, then, healthy resilience is the enactment of the fuller meaning of crisis, which includes not only danger but also opportunity.

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