

Help! I need somebody! *Using your resources can change suffering to mere annoyance*

Everybody manage stress differently. What stresses one person out may be only a blip on the screen of another's life. That is so hard to remember when you are the one who is stressing out and can't figure out what to do next..

I was so reminded of this while traveling this last week. As one thing after another went wrong, I was saved from being too distraught by observing the intense distress or lack of it that others expressed. Some people sat calmly in the gate area, saying literally, "Well, eventually we will get where we are going," while others became increasingly irate or saddened. Same stress: we all had delayed flights. Different reactions: people have different resources to cope with stress.

Waiting and watching people in that situation, I was struck by that idea of resources. I observed some people become calm and move into a relaxed waiting mode, dozing, stretching, playing on electronic devices. I observed one mother and teenage daughter sit, unreactive and trancelike, who apparently had few financial or emotional resources to regroup. Most people called loved ones to complain, commiserate, inform, change plans or otherwise get support for deciding what to do next. I observed some people get online and start re-arranging their travel. They had knowledge about how to do that, they had self-confidence to pull it off, and perhaps they had a sense of self-direction or ability to influence the next thing that would happen. They rebooked flights without waiting for 'customer service' to do it for them, they rented cars to drive instead of fly. I could observe this: they brought emotional, mental and financial resources to bear on the situation.

Now, I acknowledge that financial resources matter a lot when you are stuck. While most everyone had a phone and internet access, many did not have the money to just book another airline or rent a car. But I was still struck by the ways in which people went about using their resources. I could see the people I assumed were depressed as they railed against the injustice but did not help themselves or as they passively sat looking miserable.

It is not uncommon to forget or lose track of our resources when we are depressed. Our mental energy is sapped; we forget that we can influence our surroundings. We don't remember that even though we are not in control of events, we can certainly influence what happens.

So what is there to do about the challenge of continuing to bring positive influence to bear when you get mired in depression? A depressed is low on energy first of all. Emergencies can boost your energy via adrenaline, but you still may find your thinking is sluggish. And a depressed mind is much faster to see negatives than possibilities, so finding solutions may require help from outside your brain when you are so negative you cannot easily generate positive options. I call that finding an 'external prefrontal cortex: i.e., utilizing resources outside of what your own thinking-brain can generate in the moment of stress.

Using an "External Pre-frontal Cortex" or "What other resource have I got than my own brain in my situation?"

When you have a problem the first thing to remember is that you have resources. What constitutes resources?

- A. *People* we rely on for their support, their knowledge, and connections to other people who can further help with information or connections. They are relationships we can nurture and draw on when our own resources are insufficient.
- B. *Knowledge and skills*, including using positive emotions, are resources that can be gained and improved upon. Generally going through trouble hones these resources! But it is also important to draw on others to help with their knowledge or skills. We cannot know and do everything! Heaven forbid that I should have to learn how to repair engines when my car breaks down before I can fix it.
- C. *Attitude* is a surprising resource, helping us keep cool so we can think more clearly.
- D. *Money*, not surprisingly, is a tremendous resource. Our culture does not focus us on saving, but I am a strong advocate of saving some of what we earn to help in a future crisis. This is hard if you are truly living hand-to-mouth, but I see a lot of people whose priorities are here-and-now pleasure without thought for future needs. (Yes, I have become a real ant instead of a grasshopper!)

What is your "In case of emergency" plan?

The reason to plan ahead for emergencies is that the neurochemical nature of emergency can cause our stress to soar, our minds to go blank, and our problem solving skills go out the window. This is truly a brain-based freeze, and it is not easily overcome. If you were an emergency responder, you would be trained and drilled repeatedly in the things to do when the crisis occurs. We often can do that for possibilities. For example, I live in the land of tornados. We plan where to go in the basement if the sirens go off, and we know where the flashlights are. We might have a battery powered radio or make sure our cell phones have a back up battery. There are many such predictable *potential* emergencies, but once planned, we don't dwell on them.

None of us can prepare for everything, because the very nature of emergencies is they are unexpected. We would get awfully anxious if we trained for every possible thing that might go amiss from spraining an ankle to a water main breaking in the neighborhood.

In the moment of a crisis, it is hard to remember what our resources are. So right now, perhaps while not in the middle of an immediate problem:

1. Identify your *personnel* resources. When we reach out to friends, family or colleagues we are tapping into their knowledge base as well as asking them to use their skills to help us. The people I observed in the airport were using friends and family to commiserate, check weather maps, and ask for ideas of alternate transportation. Identifying potential helpers, those who will encourage us or will help us connect to other resources when we otherwise might try to tough it out alone, can be done by asking yourself ahead of time:
Who in your life is supportive?
Who in your life is decisive and can be helpful to making a plan?

Who is available to talk when you just need to get your emotions out?
Whom can you call for desperate emergencies? Copy and carry those numbers, I learned early to carry copies of my ID and credit cards front and back in case of theft.

2. *Knowledge and skills.* Our people resources might help us connect to the right helpers when we do not know what we need or what to do. Almost everyone in that gate area was asking each other what they knew and what they were going to do: gathering ideas. One woman I observed got right on the phone with her corporate travel planner and turned the problem over to her, then went for coffee while she waited for a return call with a rearranged travel plan. In highly stressful situations we may need more than encouragement. We may need help to do something for us (think medical) or to teach us a skill (think computer programs.) Most of us do not have all the information that we need. When you are depressed, your brain just cannot wrap itself around the idea of locating resources; however, working with this idea ahead of time, when you anticipate working on a problem that is stressful, you can make sure you know who has skills you lack. For example, carrying a AAA card when you drive, finding out basic facts about safety in new environments (ask a concierge at a hotel, observe where the exits are, plan where to meet if lost or late), or read the manual about operating power tools. (I admit, not only am I an ant but I am a girl).

Keep the attitude that you are ready to learn from mistakes.

3. Attitude can be planned too. Depressed minds tend to beat us up for mistakes rather than productively taking the attitude “What can I learn from this to prepare myself for a similar situation?” My grandmother used to say that no experience is wasted if you learned from it. Wise words and more than true for depression. Practicing that attitude makes stress less painful, but here’s a hint to make it work: You don’t work on learning until the situation is over. (Nothing makes me more irritated when I am in the middle of a problem someone says to me that it is a learning experience!) But after the stress is resolved, checking on what went well and what could you do differently in the future can increase your optimism as well as your sense of self-efficacy.
4. Money! While saving money may feel overwhelming, if you seriously start with even a little, but do it regularly, you will be amazed at what you can do to develop a safety net. If you are starting really small, try stashing the away the amount you might spend on convenience store food 1 day out of every week, or don’t go out to a bar one weekend night and put that cash into your piggy bank. The easiest way is to have some cash direct deposited from your paycheck to a savings account. Whatever you have in savings though, start by just being prudent. Be sure that you leave your home, when you travel out of the state or the country, you carry some emergency cash and credit cards even though you don’t plan to use them. Knowing you have a money backup plan can reduce some of the stress of running into trouble away from home.

So remember! Next time you are really stressed, just yell “Help” but be sure to call it out to the resources you know are waiting for your call.