

Psychological Society of Ireland
November 7th 2018
“Resilience in the Real World”
Niamh Fitzpatrick

Ways to help yourself through the hardest of times

Knowing that how you feel is normal

Allowing yourself to feel what you feel without judgement. “*An abnormal response to an abnormal situation is normal behaviour*” (Viktor Frankl). So, when you are going through hard times, acknowledge the pain, know that it is ok and let yourself feel what you feel. Don't try to deny it, run away from it, or mask it. There is only one way through it and that is to keep going, putting one foot in front of the other and feeling those feelings no matter how painful, they cannot be avoided.

Controlling the controllables

When you cannot change the situation, remember that you can choose your focus and indeed your behaviour. “*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*” (Viktor Frankl). Our emotions are influenced by our thinking, so what is most useful for you to pay attention to in order to set you up to be in the best emotional state to navigate your way through the difficult times? You can influence this, so use that influence wisely.

Don't let your mind go down the rabbit hole

Sometimes during difficult times in life there are questions left unanswered and our minds can run on and think of all the ‘what if?’ scenarios. Letting the mind run riot rarely helps, so it is important to be disciplined with your thinking and to not let your mind go down that rabbit hole. There's nothing to be gained by this, but there is peace of mind to be lost by engaging in this sort of thinking. So, decide to stick to the facts you do know and to not engage in any sort of mental scaremongering.

Chunk it down

It can be quite overwhelming trying to deal with some of the challenges that life can throw at us, especially the big ones. But it is important to remember to chunk it down and not trying to tackle it all at once. It's helpful to look at the situation in small manageable pieces and to deal with each piece one at a time.

Practice self-care

Rest, sleep, hydration, good nutrition, fresh air, gentle movement, connection with loved ones, something to occupy you, staying away from toxic people or from unnecessary tasks.

These can all help render your body and mind able to deal with the challenging time in your life.

Gather support

Per the ASK Campaign, reaching out for help is hugely important when we face difficult times in life. Seeking support is not a weakness, it's a necessity. Letting others support you through hard times can be beneficial both for you and for those doing the supporting, people want to help.

Doing the hardest tasks

The more we face and handle the hardest times, the more able we can feel able to face hard times. It can almost banish fear, as out the other side of those hardest of times, when we survive the moments in life that we believed we could not, is a sense of peace and calm, along with a confidence that we can handle whatever life throws at us. So, don't shirk the hardest tasks, face them and take strength from having done so.

Get professional help

For some people, going through a difficult time in life will not require professional help, however for some, a qualified and experienced ear can be hugely beneficial when it comes to finding your way in this new world. It's about processing your emotions around the situation and learning ways to navigate the tough times that are emotionally helpful.

Don't make the hard times a full stop in your life

Find a way to see even the hardest times as a comma, not a full stop in your life. If someone dies for example and we make that a full stop in our own lives, then our loved one is dead, but we die while we are living. It's about finding a way to remember and honour the person who has died and find a new way to relate to them and bring them along with us in life, but also being able to live our own life fully.

If you can't make it better at least don't make it worse

How we think impacts how we feel and in situations where we cannot make things better and go back to a life that we once had, it's about ensuring that we don't make worse by focusing on something that we cannot change. This is about thinking usefully in difficult times, choosing to be disciplined with how we view what has happened and to not layer things like guilt or resentment onto an already challenging situation.

I'll be ok, I just don't know exactly what ok looks like right now

We need to acknowledge the pain yet not get stuck in it. So, by telling yourself that you can be ok but that you just don't know yet exactly what that ok will look like, it acknowledges the uncertainty but also acknowledges that you trust yourself to get through it. It is appreciating that we don't have to know exactly how life will turn out to know that we can be ok.

Useful Resources

- Megan Devine – “some things in life cannot be fixed, they can only be carried
- Viktor Frankl – “Man’s Search for Meaning”
- Sheryl Sandberg – “Option B”
- Nancy Berns – Ted talk “The Myth of Closure”
- BBC iPlayer Facebook – “How does grief change over time?”