I have talked to many stroke survivors over the years, and I can’t think of one who said, “I was really looking forward to having this stroke.” By the same token, however, many of those survivors made satisfying lives despite their setback. To some extent, their response was determined by the age of the patient and the severity of the injury. And to some degree, a person’s emotional resilience determines whether their life improves despite difficulties or declines because of them.

“Emotional resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity,” said Dr. Peter Ubel, author of *You’re Stronger than You Think — Tapping into the Secrets of Emotionally Resilient People*. In the book, Dr. Ubel relates the stories of five people who have wrestled with serious illness or disability, weaving their stories in with discussions of the scientific understanding of emotional resilience. He shows that people systematically underestimate their ability to bounce back: “People who encounter adversity often discover, to their own surprise, that they are as happy, or almost as happy, as they were before encountering the adversity. People imagine that happiness is a matter of circumstance, when instead happiness is what people make of their circumstances.”
Bouncing Back

Whether we see something as a challenge or an obstacle, Dr. Ubel thinks human beings are hard-wired to deal with adversity. “If you want to know what an emotionally resilient person is like, you can probably start by looking in the mirror,” he said. “In the face of adversity, most people are able to find happiness again.”

Dr. Ubel, who is a professor of medicine at the University of Michigan, spent five years studying the nature of human resilience through experiences of thousands of people who faced extreme medical setbacks. These cases ranged over such circumstances as patients with terminal illnesses, chronic disorders, remissions and life-altering circumstances. What Ubel and his team of researchers found is that patients remained strong in the face of adversity by drawing upon their underlying emotional resources, focusing their lives on meaningful goals and finding ways to contribute to others.

Flexibility is a key ingredient of resilience, in part because it leads to adaptation. “When people confront adversity, those who are able to shift their life goals, in response to their circumstances, are usually happier than those who do not shift their goals,” Dr. Ubel said. “Being flexible in the face of adversity is part of emotional resilience.”

What Works

There are genetic and psychological ways of staying strong in the face of challenging circumstances.

• **Negative emotions demand attention** — Our cognitive functions go on red alert to find some way to cope with pain and negative feelings. “Negative emotions tend to focus people more than positive emotions,” Dr. Ubel said. “When people feel bad about something, they look for ways to get rid of the bad feelings. That is why animals have emotions in the first place — to motivate behavior. It’s nature’s way of dealing with the difficult stuff.”

• **Silver-lining thinking** — Researchers have found that people find creative ways to minimize emotional pain by looking for silver linings in the darkest clouds. I have heard from innumerable survivors how their strokes taught them invaluable lessons, forming their characters in unique and satisfying ways. Finding the good in what is going on right now reflects spiritual maturity and allows a survivor to move forward.

• **Comparison thinking** — Studies indicate that people usually make the best of their circumstances by comparing themselves to those who are worse off. People seem to intuitively know how to lessen pain.

• **Knowing is less stressful than not knowing** — People are not set up for uncertainty. In a study of people undergoing HIV testing in the 1980s, a time when an HIV diagnosis amounted to a death sentence, people were happier after they received their test results than they were while waiting for them, no matter what their results were. “Uncertainty about the future causes the body to suffer under high stress levels,” Dr. Ubel said.

• **Social interaction reduces stress** — Anyone who’s been to a good stroke support group knows that sharing with others makes life better. And it’s not just receiving support that helps people adapt to their new circumstances. Dr. Ubel contends that people benefit more by being able to give support to people they love or to causes they care about. “I tell patients I work with who are struggling with difficult circumstances to look for ways that they can contribute to other people, something that will make them feel good about themselves. I also remind caregivers that as important and wonderful as it is that they are helping their loved ones, they also need to look for a way to help their loved ones give something back to them. Social support is a two-way street!”

Nurture or Nature?

“The best evidence suggests that 50 percent of the difference in happiness between one person and another person is based on genetics,” Dr. Ubel said. “If you want to be happy, and if you want to be resilient, then it helps if you have chosen your parents wisely! Because genetics influences our personalities, and our personalities shape how we respond to adversity.”

If there is such a thing as a resilient personality, Dr. Ubel picks optimists over pessimists.

If there is such a thing as a resilient personality, Dr. Ubel picks optimists over pessimists and extraverts over introverts. “Social relationships help people respond to adversity. The long-term survival of heart patients depends, in part, on their social situations, with married people surviving longer than those who live alone. Social engagement promotes health. There’s no doubt about that.”

Nor is it just your longevity that improves. “There was another finding established by these studies: People in support groups are happier than others. When people become sick, they feel better if they can talk about their illness with other patients.”

(continued)
Religious belief also plays a part in meeting challenges. The effect religion or spirituality has is complex. For starters, those who participate in religious communities gain the benefit of social support when unfortunate circumstances arise. Religious belief also boosts emotional resilience because it can give meaning and purpose to suffering. In addition, religion also provides prayer, and with prayer, people in difficult circumstances can find peace of mind. People who have a spiritual focus are better able to avoid depression that accompanies disability and life-altering illness.

“I believe that religious experiences make it easier for people to find happiness and help people to summon their emotional resilience,” Dr. Ubel said. “Religious people are more likely to believe the world is just, and such beliefs make it easier for people to overcome adversity. In times of adversity, it is important to look inward and discover what is most important in your life, whether it be your spouse, your God or your desire to change the world.”

Bringing the Mind into It

Happiness often is a matter of interpretation, and so often interpretation is a matter of perspective. “Before and after” thinking is a good example of this. Dr. Ubel contends that people facing challenges are better off if they can avoid the trap of “everything was OK before the stroke” or “everything has been awful since.”

“If people reminisce about all the good things in their lives before they faced a stroke, they are likely to become unhappy. They’ll be more bitter about what they have lost and not be able to appreciate any good fortune.”

The way out of this is for people to embrace the positive events from earlier in their lives, rather than bemoan those events as part of their previous lives.

“Positive thinking leads to greater happiness if we connect it to our emotions,” Dr. Ubel said. “Analytic thinking typically dampens people’s moods. For instance, spend a little time analyzing why you love someone and you won’t soon swoon. But spend some time thinking about how your partner makes you feel, and you will probably feel much better.”

Most important of all, Dr. Ubel recommends sharing your feelings about good experiences with your friends. “Sharing good events increases the strength and duration of your positive feelings. Positive events take on more meaning when shared with people we love. That’s why we have birthday parties and wedding celebrations and graduation events.

“Positive moods can feed on themselves, and we can harness that phenomenon to our advantage. When we experience happy events in our lives, we should take time to savor them and celebrate them with friends. Doing that assures that they will bring us even greater happiness.

“I have changed the way I practice medicine since writing this book. I now focus on helping my patients find a number of ways to improve their lives, not just through medicine.

“People can bolster their resilience, regardless of their personalities,” Dr. Ubel said. “If I had to give one suggestion, I would urge people to take 10 minutes out of every day to think — meditate, pray, write down thoughts — about what goals they want to pursue in their lives. What do they want to accomplish in the next day, week, six months or six years? Then take time to think about how to accomplish those goals. If the goals are out of reach, think of intermediate steps you can take to move in that direction. Life is too precious for us to let it slip by without spending time pursuing those things that matter the most to us.”

Goals take our focus from the adversity of the present and fix it somewhere in a future that is yet unformed. Our ancestors faced challenges and obstacles, and they gave us the tools to meet the challenge. All human beings are wired for this, but stroke survivors have been specially selected by fate to demonstrate this capacity.