

Resilience in the Recession: Seven Strategies to Free Yourself from Negative Thinking

By Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.

After a week and half of holiday joy and distractions, returning to real life on January 5th has hit many of us as the mother of all dreaded Monday mornings. If you are feeling daunted by the spinning thoughts of uncertainty—the recession, bills, bailouts, wars—you are not alone. Depending on how you count, there are millions and even billions of folks wanting to do the time warp, right along with you, back to easier times. Crawling back into bed, from a certain angle anyway, does seem like the only rational solution, because this isn't just a return to January, it's *that* January—the one on the downside of a major recession. Spinning the story of our lives that way, we may feel completely unequipped to handle the unprecedented challenges of today. But actually, that is just one version of the story, just a narrative that is open to revision and re-interpretation. So, even though these challenges may be greater in magnitude than anything we have encountered in our lifetime, they are solvable. Worry is worry, and all fears—great or small, real or imagined—have a way of paralyzing us and sapping our energy. There are certain antidotes that are effective in any crisis, regardless of the scale. Most important is recognizing that feelings of dread are a normal "first reaction," to an adverse situation at hand. We can cultivate a "second reaction" by challenging the distortions of our knee jerk reactions to perceived adversity. It's a matter of riding out that initial shock—like when we jump into the icy waters of the pool: we could jump right back out, but we've learned to hang in and we adjust.

Adjusting effectively to this new reality means appreciating that just because there is a crisis going on, you can't think and live in it all the time—because in crisis mode there's *nothing* for you to do but get immobilized with fear and dread. In coping mode, however, there is *much* for you to do. Coping mode allows you to think at your best to find creative solutions to extraordinary challenges and mobilize in response to new opportunities that may arise unexpectedly. Here are seven specific strategies to keep you surviving and thriving in that optimal coping range.

Strategy One: Don't Believe Everything You Think. When the going gets tough, our thoughts make it tougher by catastrophizing—magnifying and otherwise exaggerating the urgency of a situation while at the same time underestimating our ability to cope. Reality is much less daunting than the story our negative thinking tells us. So, when you start hearing absolutes like: *This is the worst situation, there's nothing I can do, everything is ruined, it will never change*, start challenging those first thoughts, and generate accurate second thoughts by toning down the language. In particular, make use of some new magic words like "yet" and "some" which highlight the temporary (and changeable) aspects of the current situation, e.g.: *this is a challenging time, I haven't figured out exactly what I need to do yet. There are some things I can do to improve it. I don't have to understand everything in order to act on some things.* Remember also that just because something feels impossible, doesn't mean it is. Feelings are fleeting—remind yourself, *I'm feeling this way right now, this feeling will change.* All feelings are valid, but they distort the picture. Push the mute button, take the feelings out of the equation and work with the facts.

Strategy Two: Get Specific! When we are in a negative spin, we begin pulling in various stray issues and suddenly the one small or medium sized issue that was bothering us has become a magnet for all obstacles, creating a supersized hurdle that is impossible to overcome. When you

notice that you are spinning, pinpoint the one thing that is bothering you most or the straw that broke the camel's back. Shrink back the problem to its appropriate size by asking, *what am I really most concerned about here?*; then begin brainstorming solutions.

Strategy Three: Control What You Can: Resilience comes from taking actions on the aspects of a situation that you can control, rather than focusing on what you have no say over. So, we can't single-handedly turn around Wall Street, but we can take charge of financial decisions in our households. But don't stop there. Taking charge of other priorities in our lives can create an immediate sense of purpose and satisfaction: tackle de-cluttering projects that are long overdue, trade cookbooks with a friend to breathe new life into cooking at home, start a pickup basketball game with friends, establish rituals with loved ones such as a family game night, or reading a favorite book from childhood with your kids. You know best what is going to revive your spirits—you don't need to wait months for a bill to pass in Congress—do it today!

Strategy Four: Compartmentalize: Be Concrete, Not Complete! Rome wasn't built in a day; rather than focus on big problems and big solutions, break things down to some concrete action you can take—even if it is clipping coupons or getting items together for a garage sale. Before the recession, it wasn't like we had every detail of our lives worked out, we just weren't asking ourselves to do so; don't put undo pressure on yourself to solve the entire big picture, yesterday. Work on one thing at a time. We tell our stressed out kids not to waste time freaking out about *all* the homework they have to do, but instead to just to work on one assignment at a time, and bit-by-bit they'll get where they need. Works for us too. Rather than spending time spinning with worry and negativity—painting the future worse than it may be—focus on what you need to do in the present.

Strategy Five: Worry Vacations and Worry Time. No matter how serious the matter, we need to take care of ourselves. In a stressful situation, if we aren't constantly thinking about what's wrong, then we may feel like we are unprepared or acting irresponsibly. Actually, we are much more effective problem solvers when we get perspective. You can accomplish this in one of two ways: either take a vacation from worry by setting aside time each day to do things that you would do if you weren't in the crisis—make a nice meal, go for a walk, listen to music, or simply think about things you'd like to do. The other way to maximize your problem-solving potential is to establish a "worry time" each day—ten minutes where you write down the concerns on your mind on one side of a page, and on the other side rephrase the concern in a more rational, accurate format. Then when worry tries to slip in at other times of the day, tell yourself, "No, not now! It's not worry time."

Strategy Six: Help Others, Help Yourself: The first beneficiary of acts of kindness is you. Finding ways in your community (or beyond) to lend a hand is a win-win situation. Volunteer, organize a food drive, start a knitting circle with friends to donate winter items, clean out your closets and donate coats and other clothing to those in need. Our collective well-being will benefit from your actions and you will feel instantly effective and energized by doing your part.

Strategy Seven: Be with Happy People: Emotions—good and bad—are contagious, so choose wisely the company you keep. Spending time with happy people, not surprisingly, will improve your mood. In fact, a recent study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that we are more likely (upwards of 15%) to be happy if we just *know* someone who is happy. The closer that happy person lives to you (a half mile away makes it twice as likely for you to be happy than if the friend

lives 2 miles away) the happier you may be. So the new adage goes like this — keep your friends close, and your happy friends closer.

Calming down our worry opens us up to an important lesson: uncertainty can be freeing. Facing our limitations does not in any way leave us powerless. Although we all may wish for a clear path out of the economic instability and general turmoil of the world today, the fact that there is no one obvious "right" solution means that you have latitude to follow your own wisdom and do what makes the most sense to you. Because the old rules for success no longer apply, innovation will be key, and summoning the flexibility to think outside of the box will be one of your greatest assets. Over time you will feel inspired, and rather than getting sucked into the problem, you will suddenly and resolutely find yourself being part of the solution.

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