

Putting Grace into Action

An investment executive reads to children at an orphanage during his lunch hour. A mother receives a gift of much-needed food and immediately shares it with another hungry family. An elderly man distributes sandwiches every evening to the homeless in his neighborhood park. A teen spends her vacation building houses for poor families rather than scuba-diving.

Unlike the headlines that shout out bad news and horrific happenings, goodness often reveals itself quietly. The people doing the good work, true everyday leaders, will likely tell you, "It's no big deal. I'm just doing my life."

And it's true. Those who practice grace are not saints, not perfect people. They come from all races, ages, genders, spiritual beliefs and lifestyles.

They are ordinary people doing acts of extraordinary importance.

What Kathleen A. Brehony discovered in writing her book, *Ordinary Grace*, is that for these people, acts of kindness lead to the kind of meaning and fulfillment that makes life worth living. In other words, we make a life by what we give.

"We all make decisions about what we will emphasize as we live our lives," Brehony says. "Whether we 'tune in' and open our hearts to ordinary grace or not is a personal choice."

The grace Brehony refers to encompasses compassion, altruism and empathy—in essence, all forms of loving-kindness, or, acting with the goal of benefiting another. These are values that most of us share. And in emergencies, such as the recent east coast hurricane, grace is usually more prevalent.

But many people fail to bring their everyday actions into accord with their beliefs and values. We have the best of intentions, but are overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life.

What makes grace come alive and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver is action. Not just caring, but courageously *acting* based on that caring. Grace in action.

Grace is not just about doing good work, but also about recognizing the inherent goodness in every human being.

"Unless our insights result in some practical action, they are not useful at all. With compassion, one needs to be engaged, involved." —Dalai Lama

It's about understanding that despite the outer trappings—the income level, social standings, education—we

all want the same essential things: our basic survival needs met, dignity, a good life for our children and meaningful connection with other humans.

We all have hundreds of opportunities a day to either pass along a spark of grace or to pass up the opportunity, leaving the world a bit older and wearier. Brehony offers 13 steps to making a difference in your life and others' by living grace in action. Here are some of them.

Discover what you love. What's important in your life? What's missing?

Be prepared for pain as well as joy. It can hurt to care. But acting on that care, participating in transforming the suffering, is nurturing.

Simplify and scale down. Where in our lives is there time for grace to enter? Learn to say no to that which is not meaningful to you.

Put belief into action. Virtues such as kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness are not intended to be lofty ideals but rather modes of behavior.

Find grace in small things. Writer Alice Walker suggests, "We have to regain our belief in the power of what is small."

Model good behavior. Children learn mostly by what they see and hear. *

10 Ways to Handle Difficult Conversations

The fallout from conversations gone wrong is not pretty: trust and intimacy suffer, while resentment and misunderstanding build. But it is possible to improve the way we handle our most difficult personal conversations. Consider the following:

- 1. Set an agenda.** Lay out the problem, indicating that you want to hear the other person's perspective and to speak your own, and that you'd like problem-solving to follow that.
- 2. Listen first.** Until people feel heard and safe, they won't have the mind-space to hear you.
- 3. Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity.** People typically spend only about 10% of a difficult conversation on inquiry and 90% on advocating a position. A better balance leads to a better outcome.
- 4. Strive to understand** what people are thinking, feeling and needing, not just saying.
- 5. Keep the focus on understanding what is happening** between the two of you, not on "winning" or being right.
- 6. Don't ignore feelings.** They are often at the heart of every difficult conversation—and they matter.
- 7. Stay supportive, curious and committed to problem-solving.** Your attitude will greatly influence what you say.
- 8. Notice when you become off-center.** Breathe. Choose to return to yourself and your purpose.
- 9. Return to asking questions about the other's point of view** if the conversation becomes adversarial.
- 10. Be persistent** in your efforts to keep the conversation constructive." *

WHAT'S CHANGED?



The one thing you can count on in life is that things change. When you have experienced something new and difficult, a group can be a great way to work through emotional, family, workplace, or interpersonal concerns and life struggles.

Cindy and Debra offer **Writing for Self-Discovery** groups and workshops. Writing is a powerful tool for helping you know and understand yourself better, grapple with a life change or dilemma, and find deeper meaning in your life. Our group experiences provide encouragement, support, techniques, ideas, and energy in an emotionally safe place.

In addition, Debra offers **New Mothers' Groups**. If you're a new mother, you're probably concerned about changes in your priorities, relationships or your work-life balance. Maybe you're feeling isolated, lonely, or struggling to get in a shower every day. Enjoy meeting other new mothers; learn that you are not alone! Babies are welcome.

Cindy offers groups for people who are grieving. **Growing Through Grief** is a group for adults in their early or middle adulthood (generally 20s through 50s) who have experienced the death of a loved one. Other situation-specific groups are formed when there is sufficient interest.

Group work can complement your work in individual therapy or provide a different healing experience. Please don't hesitate to call or email either Cindy or Debra if you'd like additional information.

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Groups forming now!

Family Stress Test

Stress is a natural and normal "by-product" of every family's life. In fact, family stress can bring out the best of us: as we stretch to meet the challenges we face, we become better parents, our children blossom and our families grow. But too much stress can spiral our families in the other direction. Take this test to see how your family fares.



True False

Set 1

- 1. There is a lot of bickering in our house. Someone is always angry at someone else.
- 2. There's never enough time to sit down together, either to talk or to eat. There's always too much to do.
- 3. My spouse and I argue a lot about how to raise the children.
- 4. It's like pulling teeth to get the kids to help around the house.
- 5. Our family has experienced a lot of significant change recently (divorce, death, blended family, job loss, illness, other trauma).
- 6. Money is very tight. My partner and I have constant conflicts about how to spend it.
- 7. My child has been having behavior problems at school.
- 8. The children get upset when they hear us arguing.
- 9. I work too much, and it's really getting to me.
- 10. We don't really talk about hard issues; we just hold our breath and wait, hoping they will go away.

Set 2

- 1. We acknowledge feelings, encourage their expression and allow time for dealing with the issues these feelings raise.
- 2. We plan time for family activities. And we eat together at least once every day.
- 3. If a blended family, we maintain and nurture original parent-child relationships and let new relationships develop in their own time.
- 4. I feel confident in my role as parent.
- 5. Our family easily maintains a sense of humor and playfulness.
- 6. Family priorities take precedence over work.
- 7. I know what's important to my kids.
- 8. When issues arise that we get stuck on, we ask for help from other family members, support groups, community-based programs, clergy and/or a therapist.
- 9. We have enough money for the important things.
- 10. Everyone in the family has responsibilities around the house and does them without being nagged.

If you answered true more often in the first set than in the second set, you may want to seek help to lower the stress level of your family. Families that communicate about problems, who face issues as they arise, who support one another and seek help when it is needed, can build strong bonds among themselves, nurture a healthy and loving family and have a lot more fun doing it! ✨

Bounce Back! Developing Emotional Resilience

Major disruptions are a “gotcha” we all experience at one time or another in our lives. For some, these hard times come frequently – the impact is overwhelming and recovery, if it comes at all, can be painfully slow. Others show resilience and are admirably able to glide through these times fairly easily, bouncing back to a normal life again quickly. Resilience—the strength required to adapt to change—acts as our internal compass so we can resourcefully navigate an upset.

When unexpected events turn life upside down, it’s the degree to which our resiliency comes into play that gives these “make-or-break” situations the opportunity for growth. The good news is that each of us has the capacity to reorganize our lives after a disruption and to achieve new levels of strength and meaningfulness. In fact, life disruptions are not necessarily a bad thing because they help us grow and meet future challenges in our lives.

It’s easy to feel vulnerable in the midst of chaos because of not knowing what lies ahead. But learning how to adapt during chaos strengthens your ability to meet stresses in the future. It’s a lot like a bone that was once fragile or broken, and is now strong from being used.

So how can you learn to become more resilient? Learning how to put closure to previous life experiences is often key for bouncing back. In addition, developing resilience depends on many factors. Let’s take a look at 7 key characteristics of people who demonstrate resilience during life’s curve balls.

A Sense of Hope and Trust in the World

Resilient people rely on their belief in the basic goodness of the world and trust that things will turn out all right in the end. This positive attitude allows them to weather times when everything seems bleak and to look for and accept the support that is out there. This approach toward the world gives them the ability to hope for a better future.

Interpreting Experiences in a New Light

The ability to look at a situation in a new way (a skill called “reframing”) can minimize the impact of a difficult situation. Resilient people take a creative approach toward solving a problem, and don’t always use an old definition for a new challenge.

A Meaningful System of Support

One of the best ways to endure a crisis is to have the support of another person who can listen and validate

your feelings. Knowing that others care and will come to your support lessens feeling isolated, especially when tackling a problem alone. It’s important to choose people you trust. Don’t be surprised if it takes several friends, each of whom can provide different kinds of support. Resilient people aren’t stoic loners. They know the value of expressing their fears and frustrations, as well as receiving support, coaching, or guidance from friends, family or a professional.

Mastery and Control Over Your Destiny

You may not be able to predict the future, but you can tackle a problem instead of feeling at the mercy of forces outside of your control. Resilient people know that ultimately their survival and the integrity of their life values depend on their ability to take action rather than remain passive. Tough times call for you

to tap into your own sense of personal responsibility.

Self-Reflection and Insight

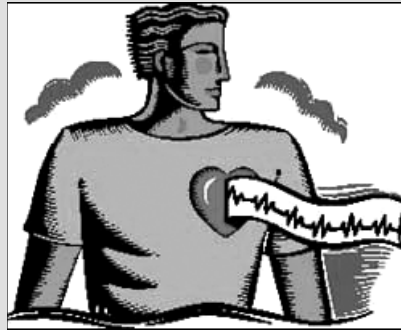
Life’s experiences provide fertile ground for learning. Asking yourself questions that invite introspection can open a door to new understanding and appreciation of who you are and what you stand for. Giving voice to your thoughts and feelings can invite insight and help transform the meaning of a problem into something useful. Resilient people learn from life situations, and they do not succumb to punishing themselves because of decisions made in the past.

A Wide Range of Interests

People who show resilience in the face of adversity are those who have a diversity of interests in their lives. They’re open to new experiences and ideas. Because their lives are rich, they can use their variety of experiences to find relief from the single-mindedness and worry which often accompanies a crisis.

Sense of Humor

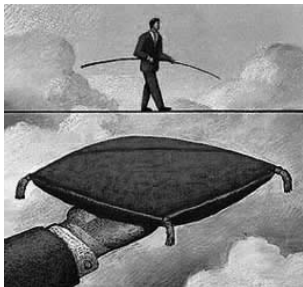
Have you ever had a wry laugh during a difficult situation? The ability to see the absurdity, irony, or genuine humor in a situation stimulates your sense of hope and possibility. Humor has both psychological and physical benefits in relieving stress because it encourages a swift change in your perception of your circumstances—and when your thoughts change, your mood follows. ✱



Maintaining Balance Is an Inside and Outside Job

If trying to maintain balance in your life makes you sometimes feel like Terrifico, the Terrified Tightrope Walker in the Circus of Life, working without a net while the crowd below holds their breath in anticipation of a slip, you're not alone. These days almost all of us have so many demands placed on our time and energy, life can feel like a three-ring circus. And if you're not up there on the tightrope, you're down on the ground in the midst of tigers and lions, in charge of keeping a couple of dozen plates spinning in air.

Maintaining balance isn't easy. It requires holding steady with the many responsibilities that are a normal and everyday part of life: home, family, friends and work, while at the same time recognizing and fulfilling personal needs and wants. Finding and maintaining balance when life can be so complicated and demanding is both an inside and outside job.



Inside—Only you can take care of yourself.

Consider how well you take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. Do you eat healthfully and exercise regularly? Do you get check-ups and take preventative precautions? Do you set aside personal, quiet time for yourself? Do you make time to enjoy nature and art, filling yourself up again and again?

Outside—Reaching outside yourself gives meaning.

Think about how you reach outside yourself for sharing and giving meaning to your life. Do you spend quality time with family and friends?

Do you give back to life through your time, energy and experience? Contributing to the larger world provides connection and purpose.

Balance—The key to a rich and fulfilling life.

To discover how well balanced your life is, keep a log of how you spend your time. In a little notebook you

can carry with you, write down the hours you spend under the broad headings: "for me" and "for others." Also make notes of requests for your time (from family members, from coworkers or professional obligations). Include "requests" from your physical and emotional self: "I wish I could take time to take a walk today." Or "Gee, I'd love to take a nap."

Also jot down your feelings about the time you're putting in. Do you resent the responsibilities at home? Do you feel like you never get to do what you want to do? Do you rearrange your time, taking away from what you'd planned to do for yourself in order to do something for others? How does that feel? Honestly?

After a week or two, you can expect to have some pretty clear messages on where there is balance in your life and where there is not. You might also come to see what's important to you and how you can make changes in your life that will create a life of health, well-being and joy—a balanced life. *



A note from Cindy Thelen

All of life involves change, and all change involves elements of loss. The death of a loved one, a divorce, serious illness, job/career changes, midlife and aging issues – losses of any kind can leave us feeling ungrounded and uncertain.

Unfortunately, many of us are told to bury our feelings, to "be strong," to get over it and get on with our lives. The problem is that feelings don't disappear. Sometimes the complex and intense feelings that loss and change naturally evoke are just too frightening or painful to face on our own. I can help you create some space around the intensity of your experience.

Cindy Thelen, LCPC, CT, is a psychotherapist specializing in grief, loss and life transition therapy in Oak Brook. While she has a special expertise in helping people through loss and change of all kinds, her work is not limited to commonly defined "grief" situations, and naturally extends to working with people who are challenged by other concerns such as depression, anxiety, troubled relationships, and family of origin issues. Find out more about Cindy at cindythelen.com or call her at (630) 530-0405.



A note from Debra Gilbert Rosenberg

Even the healthiest, most well-adjusted among us may find themselves out of sorts, confused, or seriously depressed on occasion. Even wonderful events (getting married, or having a baby) can cause emotional stress. And sometimes, for no obvious reason at all, you may feel blue, lack energy, find yourself enjoying life less, and realize that you are in need of emotional support.

If you or anyone you care about seems out of sorts, have changed their eating or sleeping habits significantly, lacks energy, or are just not managing life well, consider psychotherapy. I have been fortunate to have helped countless people, adults, children, teens and couples, to lead more comfortable, productive, and happy lives. Help is available.

Debra Gilbert Rosenberg, LCSW, has a private psychotherapy practice in Oak Brook, and runs discussion/support groups, including those for first time mothers, as well as groups using writing for self-discovery. She is the author of two books about motherhood, and speaks at schools and businesses on a wide variety of family-life issues. Check out Debra's website at: debrarosenberg.com or call her at (708) 704-1208.