

December 2023 – Musings from Lived Experience

*An opinion column by Merle Ginsburg
covering topics related to mental health and substance use*

Resilience is the key

I had the good fortune of working with a psychiatrist for 27 years. We were a good team.

Many years ago I told him that I had accomplished something quite significant. When I was finished I started to cry. They weren't tears of joy. I told him that I didn't know why I was crying.

He responded: "I think I know why you're crying. You've been in the trenches for so long you don't realize how hard you work and how hard you worked for this accomplishment. Think about the Olympic athletes. When they're on the podium they're not just crying because they're happy, they're crying because they're thinking about all the sacrifices they made and how hard they worked to get to the podium. You're an athlete in training."

I looked at him briefly. He looked back with a grin on his face, raised his eyebrows and nodded his head.

I was an inch taller when I left his office.

The words "sacrifice, athlete in training and resilient" came to mind. They stayed with me over the years as a result of that pivotal conversation.

I began to think about what professional athletes sacrifice to achieve success and reach the podium.

Sacrifices include:

- **Time:** Athletes spend an extraordinary amount of time training, practising and competing. This can result in limited time with family, friends and social activities.
- **Personal/Social Life:** Athletes have to choose their career over relationships which can strain family ties and friendships. This can further a more isolated lifestyle.
- **Mental Health:** The demand to perform at the highest level can have an adverse effect on an athlete's mental health. Stress, anxiety and depression are common challenges as a result.

By making sacrifices athletes have learned to become resilient. How is this achieved?

One of the definitions of resilience is: "The capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties."

Resilience includes:

- **Self Confidence:** Professional athletes have a strong belief in themselves and their abilities. They trust their training and preparation which gives them the confidence to face tough situations with resilience.
- **Routine and Consistency:** Many athletes follow routines and maintain regular habits to stay focused and resilient. This includes their training, motivation, recovery and sleep schedules.
- **Support System:** Coaches, teammates, family and friends play a crucial role in an athlete's resilience along with helping them to overcome challenges.
- **Positive Mindset:** Athletes focus on what they can control, staying positive and avoid dwelling on past mistakes or losses.

What strikes me is that the list for sacrifices and learning to become resilient echo similar if not the same experiences we have as people with mental health and/or substance use challenges.

Resilience is the key. It's something we can develop and build on. It's something we can cultivate. It's cumulative, it's a foundation, it's a springboard and it reduces stress.

Building resilience is a work in progress, a gradual one. It's important and helpful to keep this in mind.

Obstacles become challenges that in turn become learning experiences. Life doesn't defeat us but when it feels like it does self care comes to the forefront. There is much wisdom in knowing when to take a step back.

Resilience gives us the opportunity to make decisions with clarity and confidence.

I firmly believe that we are stronger than we think. By committing to learn how to be resilient our courage and perseverance will rise to the occasion. We will come to realize ourselves in unexpected ways. Surely this commitment will serve us well when illness strikes.

Resilience gives way to sharing our accomplishments with our peers and supporting their efforts to follow suit.

I came across another definition of resilience, a colourful one:

"Strong, tough, hardy, adaptable, buoyant, flexible, irrepressible, unquenchable, bouncy."

Take your pick. We're all in there!

I hope you feel an inch taller as this column comes to an end.

Meet me at the podium... I'll bring the kleenex...

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone well over the holiday season. I've never been one for platitudes and I have to admit I'm hard pressed to say "Happy New Year" at this time. Now is the time to be resilient more than ever. Now is the time to be with family and friends if possible. Lean on them for love and support if you feel the need. Now is the time to remember those who don't have a circle of support. Reach out to them as best you can. The smallest act of kindness will mean the world to those who benefit from it.

May 2024 bring us much needed peace & promise.

Merle Ginsburg has living experience with bipolar disorder. She has been active in the mental health and substance use community as a peer leader, facilitator and coordinator.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Consumer Involvement & Initiatives or Vancouver Coastal Health.