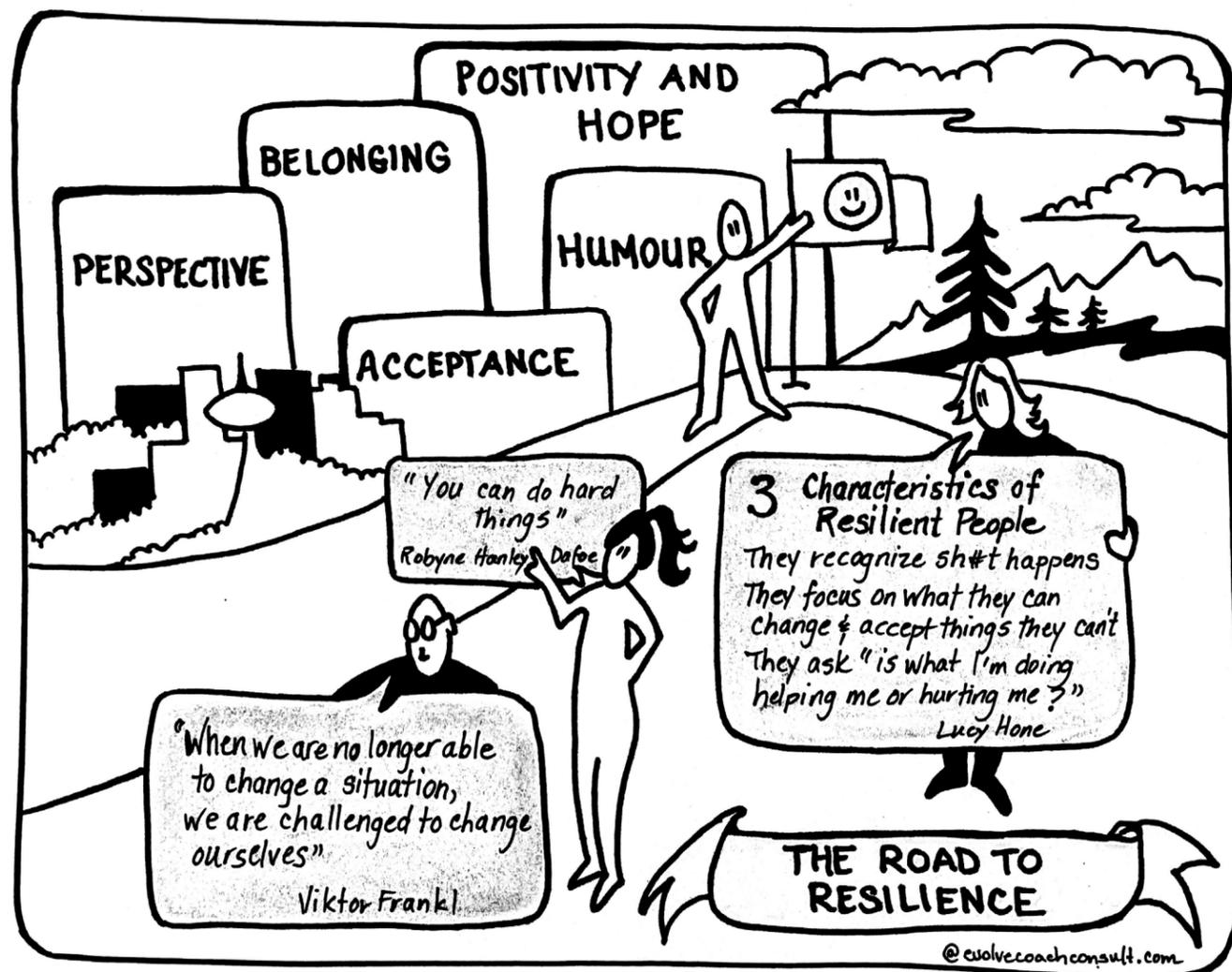


REFRAMING

RESILIENCE

BY ELAINE KLEMMENSEN, DVM, CEC



Has the universe ever presented a great life lesson that you completely missed? Following graduation from WCV, I joined a mixed animal practice in rural Alberta to discover my new boss was the Canadian version of the eccentric character Siegfried Farnon, immortalized in the books of James Herriot. He regularly offered confident proclamations and blustering bravado, and he often exploded in frustration as his new graduate missed diagnoses, broke the computer, and trashed her truck on the icy winter roads.

There was little in the way of mentorship, but beneath an intimidating exterior lay a heart of gold. I approached my first calving season with a sense of dread fuelled by a big dose of impostor syndrome and decided to adopt the “fake it ‘til you make it” approach. It was with this mindset that I found myself in a state of panic over a calving gone wrong. The heifer was in a bad way—the calf’s forelimbs were firmly lodged below the pelvis, and she had pushed so hard that the little guy’s swollen head was fully exposed.

To make matters worse, the calf was very much alive. After an epidural, lots of lube and more than a little cursing, I was no further ahead. I decided to perform a Caesarean, thinking it would allow me to pull on the calf’s back feet while the rancher pushed the head through the pelvis. The situation quickly went from bad to worse when the heifer went down with the calf still firmly lodged in the pelvis. I started to sweat, my gut clenched, and my focus narrowed to a single thought, “I don’t know what to do.” It was in this moment, as I was seconds from melting down, that the seasoned rancher walked over, put his arm around my shoulder, and said, “It’s okay, Doc. We’re in this together.”

As I look back, I see how my mindset at the time prevented me from learning a valuable lesson about resilience. My childhood and the success I had experienced to this point led me to believe the following:

- Resilience = stubborn tenacity
- Asking for help = failure or weakness

I cannot help but wonder how much easier life might have been if I had recognized the lessons that wise rancher offered. Asking for help does not make you a failure; it makes you human. Being vulnerable isn’t weak; it is, in fact, an act of courage. Giving yourself the grace to be human, to struggle and to fail, is necessary if you want to become more resilient. I am embarrassed to admit how long I held tight to the above beliefs, and I wonder if I am alone in my misguided definition of resilience.

As a coach, I define resilience as the ability to recover one’s balance in the face of uncertainty, change, and life’s challenges. It is the ongoing process of building a strong foundation that keeps you grounded and centred so that you are better able to manage yourself amid the chaos going on around you. It moves you from being a spectator in the stands “watching things happen to you” to being in the game and choosing how you want to play. Defining resilience as strength and stubborn tenacity can serve your purpose in the short term, getting you through the immediate challenge. Life, however, is a marathon, not a sprint. Expanding your mindset and developing behaviours that build resilience from the inside out will set you up to finish the marathon and enjoy the experience of being in the race.

So what are the building blocks needed to construct a healthy foundation upon which resilience can grow? We can learn a lot about resilience by looking at the habits of those who have lived through great hardship or tragedy. Viktor Frankl, holocaust survivor, author, and psychotherapist, noticed that prisoners who were more likely to survive the concentration camps developed rich inner lives, had future-oriented goals, found meaning in their experience, and resisted giving in to hopelessness. Although she did not experience the horrors of the holocaust, Lucy Hone, a researcher with a PhD in positive psychology, suffered a devastating loss: the sudden and traumatic death of a child. From her research and her own experience, she identified three characteristics of resilient people:

- They recognize that sh#t happens
- They have a habit of focusing on what they can change and accepting things they cannot
- They regularly ask, “Is what I am doing helping or harming me?”

Research consistently identifies resilient people as those with the ability to reframe situations from what happened to them to what they can take away. They see the good, the bad, and the ugly in their experiences, and they feel the big emotions. However, they recognize what is within their circle of control and what is outside of it. Resilient people see the choices available to them and become intentional about where they place their focus. It isn’t about hiding from the bad stuff but rather accepting that the bad stuff is part of “running a marathon.” You get to choose how you will show up and run the race.

Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe, a psychologist who specializes in resilience and coined the mantra “You can do hard things,” created a framework of five key competencies to help build a strong foundation.

1. Belonging—The Harvard Study of Adult

Development identified that the most important factor in having a happy, fulfilling, healthy life is the quality and depth of our relationships.

We all need people who make us feel valued, loved, and safe. The number of people in our inner circle is less important than the quality of those relationships. Invest time in finding and nurturing a diverse and supportive community that allows you to show up authentically, solid in the knowledge that you matter.

2. Perspective—Our internal narrative often

distorts reality causing us to lose perspective or get stuck in our heads. Start listening to the wisdom of your body and learn to trust all your senses to get a balanced view of a situation. Perhaps your exhausted body is telling you that your battery is depleted and you need to make recharging it a priority. Perhaps your unsettled gut is telling you your actions are out of alignment with your values and you need to have a difficult conversation with someone. Learn to foster mind-body awareness to close the gap between intellect and emotion and find a more balanced view of a situation.

3. Acceptance—For many of us our first reaction

to a negative situation is to ask, “Why did this happen to me?” This question not only places us in a victim orientation, but also wastes precious energy by focusing on the past and trying to control things that are outside our control. Instead, accepting what happened and asking “what” or “how” questions like, “What can I do to influence this situation?” or “How do I want to show up here?” shifts our focus to the future, builds positive momentum, and helps us regain our balance.

4. Positivity and hope—Fear and negativity are hardwired into our DNA for a reason: they helped keep our ancestors safe on the savanna.

However, allowing our fear or anxiety to control our actions limits our options and depletes our capacity to build resilience. In his book *The Anatomy of Hope*, Dr. Jerome Groopman defines hope as “the elevating feeling we experience when we see—in the mind’s eye—a path to a better future.” “Hope,” he writes, “acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path” and is not deluded but rather “gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them.” Step back to gain perspective, use mindfulness techniques to calm your amygdala, and once you are in your “thinking brain,” consciously choose hope over fear. In this way, you can find the courage to confront life’s challenges and in doing so learn from them.

5. Humour—Leadership coach Kevin Cashman said, “The more rigid and self-centered we are, the more out of balance we become.” Humour is an important tool that allows us to reset, gain perspective, defuse a difficult situation, or build empathy and rapport. Taking yourself less seriously brings play and positive energy into your life. It allows you to take a momentary break from life’s challenges and create a space for hope to grow.

Building resilience is a dynamic process. It isn’t a place you arrive at but an ongoing journey built upon your experiences and ability to reflect on the lessons learned along the way. Focusing on your foundation creates conditions that support reframing, helping you gain perspective and start building your resilience from the inside out. Rather than moving through a world where life happens to you, you can intentionally create the life you want. To borrow from the words of Dr. Hanley-Dafoe, you will be secure in the knowledge that “you CAN do hard things.”

To save space, the references for this article are made available on the Chapter’s website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/west-coast-veterinarian-winter-2021-list-of-references. 

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