

When Life Throws You a Curve

“You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.” Chinese proverb

Someone you love gets very sick. Your friend loses her job. Your partner wants to call it quits. You didn’t get the bonus you felt you deserved.

Adverse events are natural and unavoidable aspects of being human. We know that things can go wrong, but somehow it still surprises us; we feel caught off guard or singled out. When it comes to something really important—family, health, livelihood—we can find ourselves captured in a storm of emotions: “That’s not fair!” “There must be some mistake!” “This is all your/his/her/their fault!”

While we can’t change the past or control events, we do have choices over how we respond to life. Further, the best choices we make are based on our core values. Even in the midst of pain and shock we can take steps to clear the mind and stay true to our principles while “turning lemons into lemonade.”

“Cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me...”

With this startling statement, Lance Armstrong asserts that his experience with cancer brought a focus and intensity to life that he might never have experienced otherwise. This led, among other things, to seven Tour de France victories. But his comment refers to more than that: it emphasizes that the experience of adversity is less important than what you choose to do next.

What to do.

The most important strategy for coping with the curves life throws is to focus your energy on the things that you can influence or control. Here’s how:

Allow yourself to experience your initial reaction, whatever it is, without acting on your initial impulses.

- Focus first on understanding and accepting your response, for example, “I feel angry and hurt right now.” “I feel panicked.” “I can’t imagine ever feeling better.”
- Do not act on thoughts like “I’ll show him a thing or two” or “This is hopeless, I might as well give up.” As compelling as they may seem, impulsive actions will usually only make the situation worse.
- If you need extra support to manage your initial reaction, get it. You could talk with a friend, EAC consultant or therapist. You could consult with a support group or spiritual mentor or engage in a physical activity that will help you calm down.

Accept what has happened, to the best of your ability.

- Any energy spent trying to change the past will not produce a helpful result. You may have known people in your life who seemed to live in the past: “If only I had married him/her,” “If only I had gotten that job,” “If only I hadn’t been drinking that night.”
- Accepting a new reality may be challenging, especially at first, but it is the only way to free up your personal resources to take effective action.

Review your core values and key goals. Consider the following questions:

- What are the most important things in my life and how does this event affect them?
- What are my options for this situation and the likely outcome for each one?
- Which course of action would best express my personal values?
- What help do I need to cope with the emotions I am experiencing?
- What other help do I need?

Use the answers to these questions to guide your actions. Focus on the things you can actually have an impact on. For example:

- If you have experienced a setback at work, what actions would best express your core values? Yelling at your boss? Complaining to your coworkers? Taking it in stride and figuring out how to make things better next time?
- If someone you love has been diagnosed with a serious illness, what actions would best express your core values? Making the most of every passing day? Asking for the help you need to handle the situation? Reminiscing with them about the past? Putting less important things on hold while you attend to his or her treatment?

Get the help you need.

In times of trouble, gather your support network and ask for the help that you need. If you need to build a network, look for other resources such as support groups (in-person or on line) or your spiritual community.

It is through living life true to your own values, even in the most difficult of times, that happiness and satisfaction arise. You don’t control the world, you never will. But you can make a huge difference in how your life feels by accepting your reactions to life’s adverse events and basing your actions and your life plan on the bigger picture.

EAC consultants can help you develop a coping plan and a support system to navigate through bumps in your road. Consultants are available any day, any time at 1-888-327-0027.