

# “Here’s What 9/11 First Responders Taught Me About Resilience”

This article is from the “Edifying the Body” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website ([churchofgodbigandy.com](http://churchofgodbigandy.com)). It was posted for the weekend of March 2, 2024. (A version of the article was posted at [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk) on Feb. 26.)

**By Dr. Sue Varma**

NEW YORK, N.Y.—My patients often seek help during the darkest of times: job loss, medical illness and the loss of a loved one are just some of the challenges that can feel tremendously daunting.

But what happens when several of these tragedies happen all at once, in one day, in one moment unexpectedly and so tragically? This was the reality faced by many on Sept. 11, 2001, in New York City.

As a young psychiatrist in training, I had never imagined that I would be working with survivors of such a catastrophic event.

Suddenly, as a trainee at a New York City hospital, I was responsible for the mental-health care of rescue, recovery and support workers, as well as grieving families and ordinary New Yorkers, as we all struggled to make sense of life after the largest terrorist attack on American soil.

A few years later, I was selected as the first medical director of the World Trade Center Mental Health Program (WTC MHP), part of what is now NYU Langone Medical Center, one of seven centers across the U.S. established in the wake of the tragedy to provide ongoing screening, treatment and support to WTC responders.

Little did I know that this experience would plant the seeds for what would become my philosophy when it comes to coping with life’s challenges: something I like to call practical optimism.

I discovered that optimism played a pivotal role in building the resilience I saw in many of the patients I’d encountered.

Initially, I had thought of optimism as something one was either born with or not. However, over time, I realized that, while genetics did play a role, the rest was up to us.

I wanted to learn and teach skills that could help individuals bounce back from adversity and thrive in the face of it.

And, from the many amazing people I met in the aftermath of 9/11, I learned some of the most essential tools a person can have in the face of trauma and adversity—and it is by this guidance that I live my own life.

Here are the five strategies that I practice every day and help to keep me going, even in the worst of times.

### **1. Find a bright side (even if it's really hard)**

Even in the midst of tragedy, our perspective is a choice. Tragic events often expose us both to the depths of depravity and the heights of humanity. Which aspect we choose to focus on will determine our outlook on life.

When I'm unable to change a situation that is causing me upset, I try to find a way to change my attitude toward it. This shift in perspective allows me to reframe what would've been an otherwise unpleasant situation for me and turn it into a more tolerable (and maybe even pleasant!) experience.

Try to see things from another person's perspective, or seek a positive take-away—a silver lining, a lesson learned, a bullet dodged, a crisis averted.

### **2. Help others—and share your pain**

When we change 'I' to 'we,' even illness becomes wellness. Altruism, giving back to the community, and helping others can shift our focus from inward rumination to outward connection. Even small gestures of kindness can make a significant impact to your own mental and physical health.

Turn your pain into purpose by sharing with others any insights you have. I know people whose extreme life experiences have required them to cope with loss, trauma and hardship—and sharing what they learned became an important part of their own healing journey.

We also know that altruism can be therapeutic for those who've experienced severe stress. Several of my patients have expressed interest in the areas of grief counseling, rehabilitation and therapy—from helping others with physical injuries to substance-use disorders—as a result of their own experiences, losses, trials and triumphs.

### **3. Keep nothing bottled up**

It takes more mental resources to stifle emotions than to express them. Unexpressed emotions often manifest as physical symptoms. Keeping a journal to express emotions, worries, fears and concerns can be liberating and therapeutic.

### **4. Volunteer for a sense of purpose**

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl talks about what he learned as a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camps: "Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose in carrying on. He was soon lost."

And in a study published in *The Lancet*, participants who'd expressed a sense of meaning and purpose were 30 percent less likely to die during the average eight-and-a-half-year follow-up period than those with the least well-being.

So it's clear that developing a sense of purpose in life can buffer us from stress and help us stay afloat during challenging times. Even small acts of volunteering or helping others can create a sense of self-worth and purpose.

It might be as subtle as parents volunteering at their child's school as a way to be more involved in their child's life, plus adding a parents' night out after the meetings.

I've seen this purpose/pleasure combo take the form of a fund-raising exercise session followed by a communal dinner. Or some whose work is consuming their nights and weekends deciding to reclaim their time and give back by volunteering in a community garden on Saturdays.

The effort doesn't have to be big. Many of my patients in the WTC Mental Health Program simply accompanied others to their medical appointments. Their presence was the greatest gift to their fellow humans.

## **5. Never suffer in silence**

Don't suffer in silence. Reach out for support when needed. There are resources like the national suicide prevention hotline (988) available for those who need them.



### **Teresa's story**

Teresa is just one example of the amazingly resilient people I met during my time at WTC MHP, and she serves as a poignant example of how optimism and purpose can shine through even the darkest of times.

At the time, Teresa was a 68-year-old woman. Originally from Venezuela, she had worked as a bookkeeper for 20 years at a small accounting firm. On 9/11, she found herself trapped in the chaos, barely escaping the North Tower just minutes before its collapse.

She witnessed the unimaginable sight of people jumping out of the building, covered in blood, dust, and debris.

As part of the medical program, Teresa underwent screenings for physical and mental-health symptoms. Surprisingly, despite the traumatic experiences she had endured, she never developed any mental-health issues.

Throughout her life, Teresa faced various hardships, including those on 9/11, but she displayed exceptional resilience. It might have seemed as though she was impervious to stress-related symptoms.

What set Teresa apart even further was her willingness to share her strength with others.

Teresa volunteered her time and joined community organizations to help those affected by the tragedy. She accompanied fellow patients who experienced panic disorder, agoraphobia and the fear of public transportation and crowds, which were common responses to the trauma of 9/11.

When I asked Teresa about her secret, she simply smiled and said: "*Mi propósito*," which means "my purpose" in Spanish.

She firmly believed that, by giving back to others, we gain even more in return. Teresa's actions exemplified the power of altruism in the healing process. She understood that helping others not only benefits the receiver but also fills our own cup, ensuring that we have the strength to keep pouring into the lives of those around us.

This powerful lesson from Teresa reinforced the idea that finding optimism in unlikely places often involves looking beyond ourselves and actively seeking ways to contribute to the well-being of others, even in the midst of our own grief and struggles.

This does not imply neglecting your own needs. Rather, it's being open to sharing your strength with others when you are able.