

Seven Strategies for Staying Up When Life Is Pulling You Down

Rebecca Faye Smith Galli

There was once a farmer who owned an old mule. One day the mule fell into the farmer's well. When he heard it braying in distress, the farmer felt sympathy, but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving.

So the farmer rallied his neighbors to help shovel dirt into the well to bury the mule and put him out of his misery. Initially the mule was hysterical, but as the shoveling ensued and the dirt hit his back, a thought came to mind...each time a load landed on him, he could shake it off and step up.

And he did just that, blow after blow, repeating his mantra to encourage himself. No matter how painful the blows, or how distressing the situation seemed, he fought panic and instead focused solely on his goal. As a result, it wasn't long before the battered and exhausted mule stepped triumphantly over the wall of the well. What seemed like it would bury him had actually blessed him...all because of how he handled his adversity.

Late one night several months after a rare flu-like illness left me paralyzed, my former IBM manager forwarded me this story, with no author to credit. Somehow the mental image of a stubborn mule refusing to be a victim put some starch in my will that day. By that time in my life, I had reached my own tipping point of adversity: I'd lost my seventeen-year-old brother when I was twenty; had experienced the anguish of losing two unborn children; had birthed two children with special needs; had watched my marriage disintegrate; and now I'd lost the use of my legs. There were days when the bed looked more inviting than any plans I had made. I would scoop up my legs, tuck them under the blanket, and pretend that the contraption of a wheelchair beside me belonged to someone else.

I was not living the life I intended. Yet, that stubborn mule intrigued me. He was panicked, but determined to not be buried. Shake it off. Step up. It made sense. It helped. Although I could not admit to being "blessed" by my adversities—just not that highly evolved, yet—I stole that mantra as my own theme song, using it whenever pity threatened to take up residence in my mind.

"Life is difficult," Scott Peck began his book, *The Road Less Traveled*. And as for problems, "Adam had 'em," Ogden Nash reminds us. Some of us may have had more than most, but we all struggle from time to time. Still, I consider myself an amateur—an accidental student of tough times. Here's what I've learned so far, with help from my family, my, **"Seven Strategies for Staying Up When Life Is Pulling You Down."**

1. REFUSE TO BE A VICTIM

This is a decision I make over and over as I bump into life's inevitable problems. To keep it simple, I've borrowed the basics from our friends in fire safety: Stop, drop, and roll.

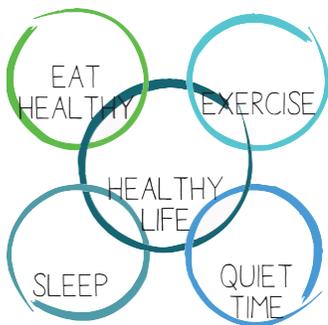
1. Stop. And admit it. You've fallen into a hole and are feeling dirt hit your back. You may not be sure how you got there or why you feel this way, but you know you aren't at your best. You are down, in a funk, or have just plain lost your mojo or the song in your heart. Nothing good can happen until you admit where you are and that you are struggling.

2. Drop. And decide. Do you want to do anything about it? Some folks enjoy misery. Whining comes naturally for them and they like the attention their hysterics attract. Others ignore their predicament, overlooking the obvious because it is too painful or too difficult to face the reality. Still others may not be ready to act. They are not willing to take any action and want to wait it out, hoping for change that may be unlikely, but for whatever reason is worth waiting for. They need time to absorb the situation. You can stay in this step as long as you like—but realize you are choosing to be there even though there is an option to proceed.

3. Roll. And act. Once you've accepted the situation and are willing to address it, make a plan. What resources do you have? What do you need? Who can help you? Determine what is under your control and focus on your strengths to achieve it. Let go of the rest. This is my coping cycle, the way I refuse to become a victim. I have used it for all sorts of struggles, sadness, and even deep grief.



2. MAINTAIN HEALTHY HABITS



Decide what is important to your long term health and create a sustainable routine to address it. To be on my game, I know I need good sleep, a balanced diet, plenty of water, attentive self-care and maintenance to prevent paralysis issues, and my daily QT, or quiet time of reflection and reading. I begin my day with a glass of water, a tip I borrowed from one of my son's wrestling coaches that helps kick start the body in a positive way, boosting metabolism and flushing out toxins. After tending to the dog and cat, I grab a cup of coffee (I know, may not be the best choice, but it helps me focus) and wheel into my sunroom, parking at the end of my breakfast table so I can look out into the backyard for nature's inspiration. QT is my time to get centered for the day—to be alone, absorb a few new thoughts, and take stock of what is doable for the next twenty-four hours.

3. BE GRATEFUL, DAILY

For me, this is the quickest way to nip a pity party in the bud. When I'm feeling down, I try to think of three things I am grateful for. It can be as simple as a good night's sleep, a cloudless sky, or the fact that I got the trash out on time this week or only hit the alarm twice that morning. I often keep a running list and stick it in my QT caddy for quick reference. I've noticed that when I appreciate the small things, it helps me get a perspective shift that reduces the magnitude of a negative issue.



4. STAY AROUND "PLUS" PEOPLE



My mother said there were two kinds of people in this world—plus people or minus people. When you think about it, most folks either create energy or take energy away. Put yourself in the midst of people that are positive, who create energy. But if you have to be around a person who is negative, find a positive within them. Rarely is anyone 100% negative. My pastor father could find something positive to say about anyone, even the devil. "He's active," he'd say with his playful smile and a wink. Look for the positives. Make it a habit.

5. PLAN

Friday	Saturday	Sunday
18	19 	20
25	26	27

"What's planned is possible," my father said often. "Got to get my ducks in a row," Mom said almost daily. I grew up with these mantras so it's no surprise that my calendar always has something in it that I'm looking forward to. I review it daily after my QT to make sure I have something scheduled besides transactional chores and obligations. If I don't, I pick up the phone, call a friend, and make plans. As a family, we book our vacations a year in advance. It's the only way we can coordinate schedules that span the east coast, west coast and a global traveler. For me, there is tremendous joy in anticipating a planned activity and that feeling can buoy me through a low period.

6. LEARN SOMETHING NEW

Always. "What did you learn in school today," my grandfather asked my dad every time he saw him. And "nothing" wasn't an acceptable answer. Try new things. It's ok to occasionally say, "Never again," because that shows you have pushed yourself to try something new. (Foie gras? Never again. I liked it—but my body didn't. It really didn't. So, never again, but I learned something new.) For my closure party after my divorce, I designed hot pink tee shirts that said, "When's the last time you did something for the first time?" Love that. Still do. Learning keeps us growing and moving forward, so helpful in staying positive.



7. BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND



My sister says that you better like yourself because you are stuck with you the rest of your life! I consider this often, realizing the choices I make daily contribute to not only who I am, but who I am becoming. I can decide what kind of mom I want to be. What kind of ex-wife I want to be. What kind of friend I want to be. When I shift my perspective to this angle, how my behaviors and choices reflect who I am, it's easier to make the kinder, more loving choice—the "high road," as Scott Peck would say. You will never regret taking the high road. And that choice always lifts my spirits.

ABOUT BECKY...

Rebecca Faye Smith Galli (Becky), author of *Rethinking Possible: A Memoir of Resilience*, is a weekly columnist who lives in Baltimore, Maryland and writes about love, loss, and healing. A Morehead-Cain Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Becky was employed by IBM, where she was the recipient of the Golden Circle award for marketing excellence. Surviving significant losses—her seventeen-year-old brother's death; her son's degenerative disease and subsequent death; her daughter's autism; her divorce; and nine days later, her paralysis from transverse myelitis, a rare spinal cord inflammation that began as the flu—that have fostered an unexpected but prolific writing career. In 2000, The Baltimore Sun published her first column about playing soccer with her son—from the wheelchair. With 400 published columns and a completed memoir, she launched "Thoughtful Thursdays—Lessons from a Resilient Heart" - a weekly column for her subscriber family that shares what's inspired her to stay positive. She also periodically contributes to The Baltimore Sun's Op-Ed page, Midlife Boulevard, Nanahood, and The Mighty. Join her Thoughtful Thursdays family at beckygalli.com/signup.



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