

Exploring Option B

(and Bouncing Forward)

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

ADVERSITY—WE ALL ENCOUNTER IT AT VARIOUS TIMES IN OUR lives. Whether within the personal or professional realm, we are bound to encounter hardships.

In her most recent book, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy*, Sheryl Sandberg, begins by talking about the horrendous impact of her husband's sudden death on herself and her young children. The remainder of the book, co-authored by Adam Grant, discusses and provides real life examples of how grief and loss can actually transform—over time—into resilience and growth.

Embracing Our Elephants

While striving to survive this unthinkable tragedy day-by-day, Sandberg received remarkable support from family, some close friends and colleagues. Yet, she also experienced the alienating effect of being around others who did not know how to respond to her grief or acknowledge her loss, so they just ignored it. That seemed to intensify her pain; it was like the elephant in the room that those inept at empathy kept pretending did not exist.

Similarly, as HR professionals know, there are many workplaces where employees are expected to “get over” extreme adversity in a relatively short-time. It would be wise to reflect on this. We have rules and regulations in place to accommodate an employee with a long or short-term injury and disability, but are we offering adequate time and accommodation to an employee recovering from a debilitating loss such as the sudden death of a spouse?

The Three Ps of Stunted Recovery

Given the universality of such losses in our lives—and the fact that the timing of tragedy is always inopportune—it is important for HR professionals to be prepared for conversations with distressed employees in the wake of tragedy of any proportion. Throughout *Option B*, Sandberg passes on the insights of psychologists she read and consulted while seeking

to understand her own disorienting grief and its unexpected side effects.

Of particular benefit to Sandberg were the insights and research of Martin Seligman, a leader in the field of positive psychology, who puts forward the “three Ps” which tend to stunt recovery from a traumatic event. These are:

- **Personalization:** the belief that we are to blame for the event;
- **Pervasiveness:** the belief that the event will affect all areas of our life; and
- **Permanence:** the belief that “the aftershocks of the event will last forever.”

That *Option B* incorporates a high-level sampling of such resilience-related research is telling and timely. Seligman was among the inspiring highlights at the recent International Positive Psychology Association conference in Montreal this summer. His findings and beliefs converged with those of us in the 1,300 strong audience and from the stage alike—by studying what makes us resilient, mindful and resourceful, we are now poised to foster the flourishing of the human race.

Factoring these “three Ps” helped Sandberg better understand her own reaction and subsequent lack of confidence. Without the anchor of safety and stability which she felt had been swept away by her husband's death, she had been left bewildered, stranded in a tsunami of emotions and shaken to the core.

Beyond the shock though, Sandberg points out hundreds of studies that show children and adults recover more quickly when the “three Ps” are dispelled—when they realize that tragedies are not their fault, will not affect every aspect of their lives and won't follow them everywhere forever.



Bouncing Forward

In the process of understanding what helps people move beyond grief, Sandberg was introduced by her co-author and psychologist Grant to research on a broad range of trauma survivors—from natural disasters to serious accidents and severe injuries, to name a few. Results showed that some people developed posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, while others proved resilient and able to bounce back.

Interestingly, among the most resilient, some were said to “bounce forward” meaning they experienced various forms of growth. According to that research, the five most common expressions of this post-traumatic growth are:

- finding previously unexpected profound personal strengths;
- gaining more appreciation for life;
- forming deeper relationships;
- discovering greater meaning; and
- gaining new perspectives, enabling new possibilities.

About Opening Up at Work

Speaking about resilience at work, Sandberg emphasizes the importance of being comfortable with making mistakes, being open to feedback and having the courage to delve into difficult conversations as needed.

She describes the process by which her co-author Grant shifted from being terrified of public speaking to becoming a top-rated professor at a renowned university. Having the

courage and the humility to hear his students’ feedback and suggestions—and to modify his teaching accordingly—made a big difference.

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Similarly stressing the benefits of strong, open communication, Sandberg encouraged her teams at Facebook to speak more honestly to each other while pointing out that “feedback should always go both ways.”

A year after the loss of her husband, when Sandberg spoke at a woman’s leadership event at her company, she decided to be open about the painful journey of grief she had gone through. In the wake of her sharing, many employees gave themselves permission to share about the adversity they were going through in their personal lives. This effectively freed up some of the tension and stress associated with holding back and striving to keep a professional veneer over silent suffering for Sandberg—and many others in turn.

Compassion, Communication and Collaboration

By accepting each other’s human vulnerabilities at work, along with the joys and sorrows of life, we are more likely to collaborate, communicate with transparency, learn from what goes wrong and support each other into greater resilience and productivity.

As Sandberg says, aside from each of us individually holding hope in our hearts and minds, we can build hope together, as we live and work together and strive for a better future. **P**

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions. (inspiredmomentum.com)

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