

**HOW TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE:
RISING ABOVE ADVERSITY**
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Widely regarded as the most brilliant theoretical physicist since Albert Einstein, Stephen W. Hawking rose above adversity to discover a brave new world that reached beyond the stars. Born exactly three hundred years after the death of Galileo, who is known as the father of modern science, Professor Hawking holds Sir Isaac Newton's former chair as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University. Although Hawking described his college days as being characterized by "an attitude of complete boredom and feeling that nothing was worth making an effort for," a life-threatening disease known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis changed his perspective of life. As Hawking recounts, "One result of my illness has been to change all that: When you are faced with the possibility of an early death, it makes you realize that life is worth living, and that there are lots of things you want to do" (Ferguson, 1991, p. 37).

From the vantage point of his wheelchair, where he has been trapped by the progressive neurological disease that has paralyzed his body but not touched his great mind, Hawking's perspective has transformed our view of the universe. In the story of his life and work (Ferguson, 1991, p. 41), Hawking recalls the turning point in his life:

Before my condition had been diagnosed, I had been very bored with life. There had not seemed to be anything worth doing. But shortly after I came out of the hospital, I dreamt that I was going to be executed. I suddenly realized that there were a lot of worthwhile things I could do, if I were reprieved. Another dream that I had several times was that I would sacrifice my life to save others. After all, if I

were going to die anyway, I might as well do some good.

Although the progression of the disease has been slow, by the time he became Lucasian Professor at Cambridge, Hawking could no longer walk, feed himself, or even raise his head if it tipped forward. As his body became increasingly paralyzed, rendering him unable to write a sentence or even speak without a computer-synthesized voice, his vision of the universe began to expand contemporary scientific thinking. An analysis of his most popular book, *A Brief History of Time* (Hawking, 1988) reveals a theoretical journey from the origins of the universe to the final frontier of spirituality.

Hawking cannot even reach his own keyboard, yet in his integration of quantum mechanics with the theory of relativity, he has reached toward a unification theory of physics. He can no longer speak a word, yet his ideas have shaped modern scientific thought—and the story of his life has inspired millions. It was not what happened to Hawking, but what he has done with it that has mattered the most in his life. In rising above adversity, it is not what *happens* to us, but what we *do* with what happens that matters the most in our lives.

Resilience is the quiet college student who, almost lost in the flurry of activities at her first psychology convention, found a way to lead the keynote speaker through the streets of a great Southern city. It is also the confident post-doctoral resident who stood before an audience of two hundred psychologists and shared a story of overcoming painful shyness as a child. Resilience is the story of the African American girl with six months to live who became a health care professional 30 years later...the retired professor whose surgical recovery

provided a career path to walk again...the dog trainer who can no longer run in competition but who ran in his first election to become president of a state professional association.

The lives of others can be a source of inspiration for developing resilience. It is often our weakness that become our greatest source of strength.

References

Hawking, S. W. (1988). *A brief history of time*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Ferguson, K. (1991). *Stephen Hawking: Quest for a theory of everything*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

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