

Bengt Elmén
Sothönsgränd 5
123 49 Farsta, Sweden
Phone: +46-(0)8-949871
Fax: +46-(0)8-6040723
www.bengtelsen.com
mail@bengtelsen.com

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The Speed Bumps Are in Your Head ...



That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger.
– Friedrich Nietzsche

Once you finally figure out that pretending your difficulties do not exist is never worthwhile, it's high time to figure out just what kind of outlook you want to have on your difficulties. When something difficult occurs in our daily lives, many of us like to ask, "Why is this happening to ME?" You're in the middle of watching the Olympics and your TV breaks down. So you give it a few good hits, maybe even a swift kick or two, and let out a scream of "Not now!"

The first thing we usually express when something goes wrong is that we don't want anything to do with it. And I believe that if that's the first thing we feel, then it's important to let those feelings out. Some people, however, get stuck in this part of the emotional process for months or even years. Some people remain here all their lives. This is not the most constructive way to meet difficulty and prevents us from learning how to move on.

One strategy for moving past difficulty is to accept that almost every difficult situation undeniably brings something that we can learn. With this in mind, we can find it easier to tackle

our current set of problems. Only wishing that our difficulties had never occurred is merely a way of putting off solving our problems and is another way of trying to avoid them. If instead we try to find something interesting about every new thing we have to face, we will find it easier to take charge of our problems and to push through to their solutions.

It really is true that something good comes from every new situation, even if any particular situation at first appears to be nothing but negative. Every obstacle in our daily lives can be seen as a chance for personal development. To get past these obstacles, we have to learn something new. In fact, we usually consider situations difficult only when we think we can't handle them. If this is so, then we can consider all our problems merely situations in which we lack the information we need to solve them.

Of course, you can answer this by saying that some situations are difficult even when we know how to handle them. An employment interview can be difficult even when we know how to answer all the questions. Once you're actually there it's all too easy to forget your answers and to succumb to your nervousness instead.

But isn't this also a result of you lacking certain information? You might have known how to answer every question at your interview. But did you plan on how to handle your nervousness? There are ways to prepare for this too. Everyone gets nervous. To get past it you can, for instance, work on your self-understanding, or you can practice breathing and relaxation exercises.

So, there are ways of solving problems such as nervousness, but we usually avoid them because we are not convinced that we can make them work. In addition to this, taking these routes would require us to admit that our nervousness is a problem in the first place. This isn't the kind of thing we like to admit, to ourselves or to anyone else. It's much easier to admit to less personal things such as the need for learning English or French.

Almost all our difficulties exist because we lack the ideas or information that will help us solve those difficulties. Knowing this helps us turn our focus from circumstances to ourselves and to finding solutions. This way of looking at things requires more of us. It would be much easier to continue believing that our difficulties are there and that there's just nothing we can do about them. That does not threaten us with having to change anything about ourselves.

A kite needs a headwind to fly.

If it is true that many of our troubles are the result of the lack of ideas and information, then those troubles can also be considered opportunities to learn something new. Get a flat tire while biking and you are presented with an excellent opportunity to learn how to fix a flat. But that's not all. You are also given the opportunity to learn something about such things as patience. You also may learn that you can handle more than you think you can.

It's the same when we burn our eggs at breakfast. This might teach us to watch our cooking more closely. But it might also teach us that it's not worth trying to do a hundred things at once. It might teach us to give ourselves more time in the morning. And it might even teach us to eat cold cereal for breakfast instead.

Trouble seldom comes alone. This means that there can be several different reasons why we run into the difficulties we run into. Having a bad day does not mean that the day is inherently bad in any way. There is something else happening behind the scenes that brings us into contact with our difficulties. Our difficulties force us to take a closer look at what exactly is going on in our lives. If we are open enough, we can learn a great deal about ourselves that can help us to improve our quality of life immensely.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn is not to take anything for granted – that we can't be in total control. If we are prepared to gain greater self-understanding because of the

difficulties we go through, then we can even be grateful for those difficulties. This gratefulness can help us to take a more constructive approach to adversity in the first place. This in turn helps us to find solutions and move on more quickly. Handling problems becomes easier and we discover that we no longer have any need of sweeping them under the rug.

I would now like to tell about something challenging that I experienced at the bank the other day. At the same time, I will describe how this relates to the discussion above. I was at the bank with one of my personal assistants, Johan, to cash a foreign check. What I found difficult was that the teller talked to Johan instead of me. At first, I didn't believe this was happening. In other words, I was experiencing a certain degree of denial. Even though I have experienced this same treatment hundreds of times, it always surprises me.

This was actually the kind of thing I see often. It wasn't the end of the world. Yet it never ceases to amaze me that although we are living in the 21st century, people are not more aware of this issue. Unfortunately, too many people still seem to believe that people in wheelchairs are unable to talk for themselves. Having a speech impediment only makes it worse.

Yes, there are people in wheelchairs who do need intellectual assistance. Until one knows this to be the case, however, it should be common sense to address the person in question. For people in the service sector, this should be routine.

The teller at the bank did not understand this. When I realized what was happening, I became offended and angry. When I get angry, I usually get really angry, which was exactly what happened now. That the teller referred to me in the third person when speaking to my assistant only aggravated me further.

Because of my anger, I found it difficult to get out what I wanted to say. Finally, I started thinking about simply asking the teller to speak directly to me. That was when I could feel my anger beginning to subside.

This was a significant encounter for me, as I had not experienced this particular stage before. In similar situations, I have never been able to work past my anger, which has prevented me from redirecting those situations constructively. This time I felt the possibility of moving past my anger. I experienced the opportunity of taking control over the situation and this was something completely new for me.

I couldn't get a word in edgewise, however, because the teller was still talking away to my assistant. My assistant tried to make it clear that the teller should address me directly. She complied for a while but fell quickly back into her previous behavior. She did this in spite of hearing my assistant ask me for my zip code when filling out a form.

My business at the bank took quite a while since the teller had not worked with foreign checks before. Towards the end of my transaction, I was again about to ask her to speak to me instead of to my assistant, but a good opportunity never presented itself. I was again moving past my anger, though, and that felt good. That I had been unable to speak my mind, however, left me feeling a bit distressed.

This illustrates the importance of expressing your feelings instead of suppressing them when you run into trouble. Too many of us have learned to suppress our feelings and to avoid showing them in public. Our culture in general encourages this kind of behavior, but I think that consultants like myself should also be held responsible for propagating this.

Sometimes I think people are too influenced by such consultants. Some of these consultants can, unfortunately, be quite aggressive in their teaching and preaching for people to always "think positive". Motivational speakers have their place, but life would become monotonous if we went around with a giant smile on our faces all the time. Sometimes I feel the need to distance myself from such motivational speakers.

My own theory is that it is unnatural and even stressful to go around trying to think positive day in and day out. It is more helpful to try to maintain a reasonably constructive approach to life's difficulties. This kind of constructive approach means that you let yourself become angry or sad in the face of difficulty. You don't try to suppress those feelings. But it also means that you resist letting yourself get stuck in bitterness or self-pity. Instead, you find ways of moving forward.

In order to cultivate this kind of constructive approach to difficulty, it can be helpful to become better at seeing things from new perspectives. Regardless the size of the challenge, we tend to let it overwhelm us. This can happen even if it is only a matter of missing the bus.



You run as fast as you can, but right when you get to the bus, it pulls away just to spite you. "Damn bus driver!" You stomp your feet and swear and then ask yourself: "Why me?!" "Why can't I ever learn to be on time?!" This is the third time this week that you'll be arriving late to your new job, and you know how highly your boss values punctuality.

Now you're in trouble, and only because the public transport system is so unreliable. And because you're so hopeless that you never learn to get up in time. You curse the bus driver and then you curse yourself. This isn't a particularly constructive approach, however, and will not lead to anything good. You have reacted the same way twice before, under similar circumstances without any noticeable changes in behavior.

Changing your perspective to a more constructive one in this case would mean searching out the possibilities inherent in the difficult situation. All difficulties have a lesson to offer. If we don't pay attention, then we will end up meeting with the same kind of difficulty again and again.

So what can you learn from your habitual tardiness? First of all, you can realize that your tardiness stems from you. This simple truth can sometimes be difficult to comprehend. There are people who never succeed at becoming punctual, because they do not understand that it is their own choice. They would rather fool themselves into believing that it is because of factors beyond their control. That way they can avoid seeing the need of changing their own behavior.

Arriving on time is a matter of planning realistically and of leaving a time buffer for unexpected delays. If you do this, you will generally be punctual. Björn, my taxi driver, is a good example. He usually gives himself plenty of extra time, so he is almost always on time. There are those who would rather race the clock. Sooner or later, though, they have to see that this is ultimately a losing proposition.

This can take time. Learning to tackle difficult situations constructively is a long-term process. As I mentioned above, there have been hundreds of times that I have experienced people who avoid speaking directly to me. Yet I find it just as difficult every time to handle this kind of situation constructively.

If our would-be bus passenger were able to get a more constructive perspective, it would probably involve him taking a closer look at his own responsibility in the matter. With this starting

point, he would try to figure out what factors usually lead to him being late. Are his bus schedules up to date? Is he giving himself enough time for unexpected delays? These can be troublesome questions. It often seems easier to blame the blasted bus driver than to take personal responsibility.

In my own case with the bank teller, finding a new perspective could mean asking myself the following question. How can I cool my anger more quickly so that I can have a better chance of expressing myself clearly and completely? In situations like this, I usually experience my anger as an obstacle to what I want to accomplish. It would be more helpful if I would learn to ask myself early on how I could turn the situation to my advantage.

This way of thinking has aspects in common with Aikido and other Budo sports, in which you learn to use your opponent's energy to your own advantage. This works only if you have attained a certain degree of balance yourself. If you aren't maintaining your own balance, you will quickly be brought to the ground. Irritation and anger throw us easily off balance, which makes it more difficult to take advantage of our opponent's energy.

One of my assistants who used to help me with my walking exercises once told me that when Mother Earth calls, it's best to listen. What he meant was that if you are going to fall, you are going to fall, and there isn't much you can do about it. People who work with the elderly usually receive similar advice in their training. When assisting an elderly person who loses his balance, it is usually much better to help him fall as softly as possible than it is to resist. Again, this is the same principle used in Aikido. You redirect the power that threatens you into a direction that serves your own purpose.

It's strange, by the way, the kind of language many of us use when we stumble into adversity. When we're in a hurry and the car refuses to start, it's not unusual to react by saying, "Why me?!" or "Perfect!" or "It figures!" Sometimes we like to combine any of the above exclamations with the phrase "Why does this *always* happen to me?" Isn't it strange the way we use these kinds of phrases? We tend to use them in a predominately negative manner, as if we expect things to go bad. It is as if we consider it much more likely for things to turn out bad than well. We say: "That's just typical!" – as if we experience setbacks more often than successes in daily life. I find it strange that we rarely use the same expressions in positive contexts.

Getting a change of perspective can also aid you in breaking free of the self-centeredness it's so easy to fall into when encountering a difficult situation. This is a trap that it is crucial you try to avoid. It is not only depressed people who can feel sorry about themselves from time to time. I believe that all of us risk falling victim to self-pity. Giving in to this kind of thinking is a rather egocentric way of relating to the world. If you're not careful, you'll find yourself letting your own problems blind you to the people around you. You might even end up saying, "Nobody else has even come close to seeing the kind of difficulties *I've* had to put up with."

There are different ways of learning to change your perspective and to see your difficulties in a new light. You have to find out what works best for you. Leadership consultant and author Paul Stoltz offers one unique method in his book *Adversity Quotient*.

He suggests that each of us try to find something that would work like a mantra. We should then think about this mantra when we run into trouble. Paul himself likes to visualize a clown that pops up at the first sign of difficulty. The clown reminds him that there are more ways than one to approach each particular difficulty.



Since I am not as happy-go-lucky, I have chosen to visualize a tree when I run into this type of situation. A tree lives long and cannot avoid encountering difficulty from time to time. It may even have to begin its days by breaking through asphalt. All beginnings are difficult, but to begin by being forced to push through concrete is the kind of severe obstacle that certainly would have a profound effect upon a tree. It can be a tragic start, but it can also give the tree strength to survive and to flourish later.

The same is true for us. Every obstacle we meet, depending on how we approach it, can give us the strength we need to meet future challenges even better. This is not the whole truth, however. Take the example of the tree that has to lean over the stream to reach the light. This tree can become painfully beautiful. The same can be true of trees that must twist around obstacles to reach the light or trees that are forced into growing together. The trees that are least interesting to the eye are those that

look completely ordinary, such as the rows of trees on a plantation.

In other words, to attain outer beauty, you must first discover yourself and express your individuality. I think this is true for all living beings. Obstacles of different sorts may aid us in

this process. Each time we are put to the test, we are forced to show what we are really made of. In this way, we are given the opportunity to discover our true selves and our hidden resources.

My Attitude towards Life

This is a personal test. You do not have to share it with anyone else. Its purpose is to give you greater insight into who you are and greater awareness of your own thoughts and feelings. Follow your intuition in answering these questions.

Is this true for you?	Yes	No
1. At one time or another I have considered suicide.		
2. There are times I wished I were braver.		
3. Sometimes I wonder why I even exist.		
4. I have reached a high level of insight into life.		
5. I often wonder how I will turn out in the end.		
6. Sometimes people think I'm strange.		
7. It sometimes drives me crazy that I don't know what I want to be.		
8. Sometimes I feel like life is just one big rat race.		
9. Sometimes I feel like I'm right where I should be.		
10. Sometimes in a relationship it's better not to say what you think.		
11. Life should be simpler.		
12. I will die happy.		
13. I'm looking forward to growing old.		
14. I'm looking forward to the 2 nd Millennium.		
15. In 50 years our world will experience worldwide peace and disarmament.		

Is this true for you?	Yes	No
16. My dreams will come true.		
17. I always find the meaning in what happens to me.		
18. Sometimes I even enjoy the challenges life throws my way.		
19. Women usually can't make up their minds.		
20. It is often helpful to be adaptable in a relationship.		
21. Life would be easier without conflicts.		
22. Sometimes I think no one understands me.		
23. My parents probably think that my brothers and sisters live more sensible lives than I do.		
24. I enjoy helping others.		
25. Life would be much easier if people had reached the same level of insight into life as I.		
26. Life would be simpler if I were a bit more normal.		
27. Sometimes I wonder why I always end up in difficult situations.		
28. I wish that I had been born in another century.		
29. Men cannot talk about their feelings.		
30. Sometimes I wonder why life has to be so difficult.		
31. Sometimes I wonder why this is happening to me.		
32. Life isn't always easy.		
33. My parents think I lack ambition.		
34. Life would be much simpler if I knew what I wanted to do with it.		