Super Survival of the Fittest

Ordinary people aren't powerless in the face of tragedy and suffering; many bounce back with resilience. But some do more. They bounce forward and succeed in unimagined ways.

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Defining Resilience: Asha Mevlana, 38

On the spectrum of trauma survivorship, people fall anywhere between hiding under a rock and rock stardom. Asha Mevlana doesn't hide under rocks. When she was 24, she had a great job at a start-up, an apartment in New York's SoHo, and a pearl-shaped problem in her left breast. She had guessed it was cancer, and the lab technician's grim look was confirmation. The defining moment of her ordeal, however, wasn't the diagnosis, or the biopsy, or the eight months of chemo, or her baldness, or her candle-wax pallor. The life-altering moment came when her doctors announced that she was cancer-free.

Something had changed. Everyone around her had gone on blithely living their lives, talking about the crummy weather, the long lines at Starbucks, and *American Idol*. They seemed to value such inconsequential things, and she found herself yearning for a time when she did as well. Life seemed empty. She wasn't religious, but she found herself praying: "Just give me a second chance and I'm going to change my life."

Mevlana isn't alone. Each year, some 13 million people around the world are diagnosed with cancer, 10 million suffer brain injuries, and 50 million survive car wrecks. One in three women will be beaten, raped, or abused in her lifetime. Judith Herman, a Harvard Medical School professor and author of *Trauma and Recovery*, points out that traumatic events are extraordinary not because they occur rarely, but because they are so overwhelming when they do happen.

About a quarter of survivors face post-traumatic stress disorder; others experience significant depression or anxiety. Their suffering is real. But resilience is also very real; most trauma survivors eventually recover and bounce back. In some cases, they do more. They bounce forward, refocusing their energies on a new calling, a new mission, or a new path. They help others, pursue legal reforms, or embark on other lofty goals. We call such people supersurvivors.

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Asha Mevlana, New York City: To her, playing her electric violin feels more like a form of meditation.

In the aftermath of her cancer diagnosis, Mevlana began taking violin lessons, something she hadn't thought about doing in years. Her teacher asked her to play how she felt the first day she walked into the hospital for treatment. Mevlana improvised from her heart. "I played the anxiety that I felt when they injected me with chemo, and I played how I tried to be strong for everyone else when I was terrified," she recalls.

Before her illness, she was too practical to make a career out of music. But after training diligently for many months, she began playing electric violin in a few local rock bands. A few months later, she visited Los Angeles, where a friend convinced her that she could get paying gigs. "I had never taken any risks before," she says. And this would be an enormous risk—she had no job prospects in Los Angeles, no income, no place to live, and she still considered herself an amateur violinist. Then again, she had nothing to lose.

So, in 2007 she moved to Los Angeles, tugged by a desire to chase a dream. One day Mevlana picked up her violin from a repair shop. The shopkeeper happened to know the lead singer of Twisted Sister, who was looking for an electric violinist to join his tour. She auditioned. Two months later, she celebrated her 30th birthday on the band's tour bus. One opportunity led to the next, and she was soon playing with other musicians, including Alanis Morissette, Jay Z, and Mary J. Blige; she played at the *Grammy Awards*, on *The Tonight Show*, and with the band on *American Idol*.

Mevlana is one of the supersurvivors who have dramatically altered their lives after facing a crisis. These people aren't superheroes; they aren't even superhuman. They wrestle with the same questions we all face: Who am I? What do I believe? How should I live my life?

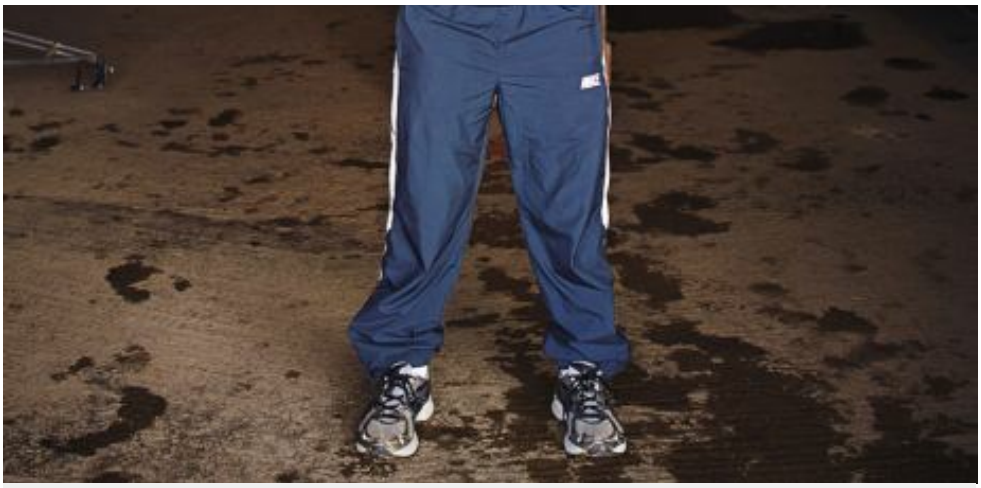
We're not praising the bright side of tragedy. No trauma is good. Every trauma involves suffering. There's nothing inherently positive or indispensable about atrocities, violence, disasters, or illness. But it's important to understand that resilience is possible. Of the many lessons that supersurvivors have to teach us, the biggest one may be that it's possible to peer into the face of tragedy and somehow emerge fundamentally changed, with an ability to affect the world in previously unimaginable ways.

Hopeful Realism: Alan Lock, 34

As a kid, Alan Lock knew he was going to be a career military man. After secondary education, he became a navigation officer on the British destroyer HMS *York*. His night watch shifts were long and tiring. One evening, he could barely read his navigation charts. Come morning, he still couldn't read them. Weeks passed and he saw phantom shadows and gaps blinking into his field of vision.

Lock had his eyes tested. The results showed he had a genetic abnormality that destroys the macula, the part of the eye related to seeing fine detail. Macular degeneration typically affects people in their 60s and 70s, but Lock was only 23. He would never read, drive, or fully see again. Two months later, he received a discharge from the military. "The worst part is that I didn't have a heroic story to tell," he says. "It's such an ignominious end."

While his peripheral vision was fine, his center of vision was permanently damaged—it was like looking through frosted glass. He tried to keep his mind on the positive, but this didn't feel genuine. Instead, he felt anger and frustration. His friends encouraged him to think positively, but Alan calls himself a natural pessimist. He knew positivity could not bring back his vision or his life in the navy. "I'm just not the silver-lining type of person," he says. "Thinking realistically was the only way to move forward."



Alan Lock, London: His friends thought he was nuts when he announced he was rowing across the Atlantic.

Supporters of the so-called "power of positive thinking" often claim that positive thoughts are so potent that they can even mean the difference between life and death. In studies with cancer patients, however, researchers typically place half the patients in therapy groups designed to help them think positively, while the other half don't participate in such groups. These studies generally find little to no difference in mortality rates between the two groups; being coached in positive thinking doesn't seem to determine who lives and who dies. This doesn't mean that interventions like these do nothing. Clearly people benefit emotionally from psychotherapeutic groups. But most therapies don't limit themselves to positive thinking. Instead, therapists generally encourage patients to express their thoughts and feelings, whatever those may be.

In Lock's case, his rejection of simplistic positive thinking helped him face his new life. Accepting the reality of his situation, he put his earlier dreams of a military career behind him to make room for other dreams. He had to begin his goal pursuit from the perspective of a blind person. His thinking is more realistic than simple positivity yet more positive than pessimism. We like to call this grounded hope, an approach involving building one's choices on a firm understanding of reality. Over two decades of research show that people who are more hopeful in this way tend to make more progress on their goals than people who are less hopeful; they also are on average less depressed, less anxious, and report that their life is more meaningful. "I know what I can't do without my eyesight ," he said to himself . "So now I'm going to figure out what I can do."

In 2008, Lock set out to become the first legally blind person to row across the Atlantic. He and his friend Matt Boreham took off in a 24-foot rowboat from the Canary Islands for Barbados. With no motor or sail, it was a dangerous journey. The men had little space to maneuver in, a compass, a GPS, gas-powered cooking equipment, and food for 100 days.

Of course, they suffered setbacks. The boat was pummeled by rough seas, and icy winds pushed them toward the tip of Africa, causing them to lose days in their journey. Then the seals broke and water leaked into the galley; equipment shorted out and food spoiled. But Lock was prepared: "It wasn't as if I didn't see this coming." He avoids the comforting fictions that make a person think everything will be fine. Instead, he often asks himself, "What should I

do now?"

After 85 days, he and Boreham landed in Barbados, and Guinness World Records officials informed Lock that he was the first blind person to row across an ocean. In later years, he would also set a record for trekking to the South Pole.

The Power Of Positive Illusions: Casey Pieretti, 48

Casey Pieretti's right leg has been blown off roughly 30 times. There was a leg break in *Universal Soldier* and another in *Priest*. A pit bull shredded it in *The Shield*, Jennifer Garner shot it with a spear gun in *Alias*, and a giant bug snapped it off completely in *Starship Troopers*. You can add stunt driving, aerobatics, and fight scenes to this list of derring-do. The 48-year-old stuntman has done it all—and all without his right leg.

He lost his leg, at age 19, while pushing a car with a loose battery down the mountain roads of the Sierra Nevadas. It was a raucous night of revelry with old friends. Pieretti, though, never drank and drove, including this night. Years earlier, his father and brother had been killed by a drunk motorist—a devastating loss that Pieretti was only just emerging from.

The boys were nearly at the garage when an old Ford came barreling through the dark. From behind them, the Ford crossed the white line, swerved, sped up, then thundered into Pieretti. The college freshman was crushed between the two vehicles. The driver who hit him was drunk.

When he woke up at the hospital, he strangely felt a near-immediate acceptance of his predicament. He thought, "I could have died; I should have died." He had learned to live without his father and brother, and now he was confident that he could learn to live without his leg. Pieretti decided to push through rehab and set himself the goal of running a triathlon within a year. Almost a year to the day after his accident, he strapped on a prosthetic and ran a mile in seven minutes. He was soon racing competitively.

Casey Pieretti, Santa Barbara: He was always told what he couldn't do without his right leg; now he shows everyone what he can do.

Friends found Pieretti's unapologetic confidence in his ability to take control of his life at best admirable and at worst delusional. It was actually a bit of both.

University of California at Los Angeles psychologist Shelley Taylor coined the term *positive illusions* in part to describe overconfidence like Pieretti's. Taylor and co-author David Armor wrote in the *Journal of Personality* that positive illusions are people's mildly distorted positive perceptions of themselves, one example of which is an exaggerated sense of personal control.

Leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith has studied the behaviors of extremely successful people. Wanting to understand the qualities that breed winners, he spent a lot of time with these people in their boardrooms, offices, and homes. He concluded that successful people are prone to what he called "delusions." The so-called delusions he's speaking about are what Taylor would most likely call "positive illusions of control." Goldsmith believes there's an advantage to having a slightly overblown sense of one's ability to control the future through one's own efforts; if these people were totally accurate, their goals might end up being too low. If you examine the careers of highly successful CEOs, he explains, a lot of them started many different companies or rolled out many products before they hit on one that truly worked. What kept them going was a strong belief in their own abilities. "If we have the illusion that we're great, we're open to trying more things," Goldsmith says.

You may question a possible contradiction here: In describing Alan Lock, we said that positive thinking isn't always helpful, and now it seems we're saying the opposite. But, it's important to contrast these productive positive illusions of control with the denial-based positive thinking we previously argued against. Whereas denial-based positive thinking is a distortion of the situation, positive illusions are inflated views of one's ability to control one's future. Painting a smiley face over a bad situation may be problematic because it's difficult to solve an issue unless you first see that problem clearly. But Goldsmith's CEOs saw their failures accurately. They just believed there was always something they could do about them.

"The way I see it, there's no limit to what I can do," Pieretti says, echoing that sentiment. "I'm willing to try anything." To get around his UC Santa Barbara campus, for instance, he wore an inline skate on one leg. This little stunt got the attention of a young woman on the skating team, and she helped him procure a second skate for his prosthetic leg. Shortly after that, he joined an aggressive skating stunt troupe.

It was here, as Pieretti's confidence grew, that he and a friend devised a plan to skate across the country to raise awareness and funds for a limb bank for young amputees. In Spring 1993, they skated from San Diego to Washington, D.C., in 50-mile stretches. They zoomed from town to town and performed stunt shows in parking lots to packed crowds.

It didn't take long for Hollywood agents to start calling. It was a natural leap from stunt skater to stuntman. Pieretti has now appeared in more than 50 films and television shows and is one of Hollywood's most sought after stunt actors. And he's as confident as ever that, through his own efforts, his future will be brighter still.

The Company You Keep: Amanda Wigal, 33

People rarely recover from accidents like Amanda Wigal's. In June 2007, Bartlett Lake, Arizona, was filled with skiers, wakeboarders, and plenty of boats. Wigal was captain of her small vessel, the *Sea Ray*. Her fiancé, Jeremy Schlosser, maneuvered the boat into a small cove and anchored it. Their guests ate sandwiches and swam while Schlosser tied a tube to the boat. Wigal would be the first to sit in the tube and ride the waves. After their boat took off, Wigal in tow, Schlosser noticed a big white vessel cruising on the wrong side of the lake, coming right toward them. He veered their boat away, but he was too late. Wigal's head slammed into the hull of the oncoming vessel, and the blow knocked her unconscious.

In a coma, she was airlifted to the hospital, where doctors pronounced that she was unlikely to wake up. A seemingly endless stream of people filed in and out of Wigal's room. They

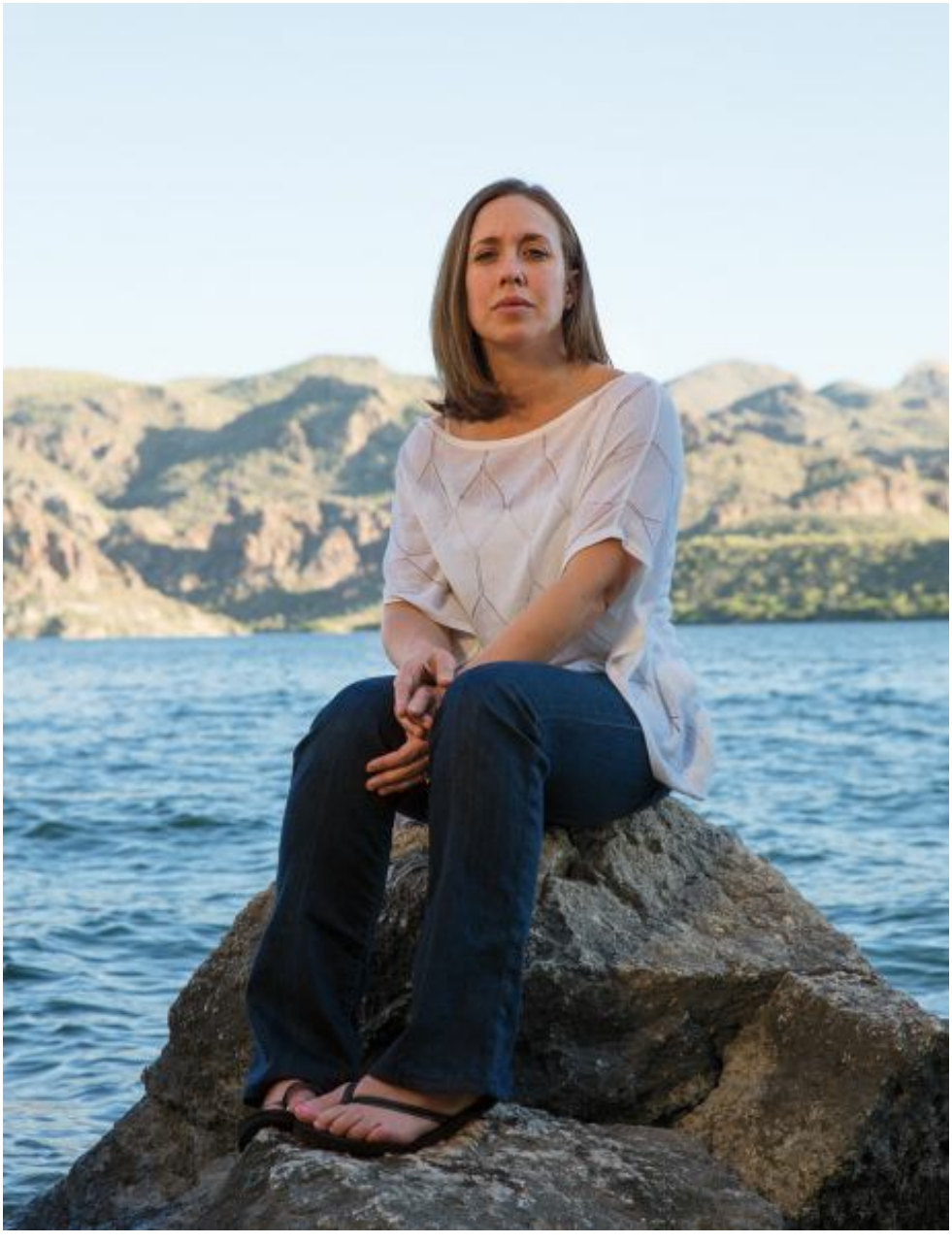
stayed by her side every day, expressed their love for her, and held her hands. Weeks went by with little change in her condition; doctors informed her family that keeping her alive only postponed the inevitable. The visits of encouragement turned into tearful good-byes.

At which point, she woke up.

Doctors tend to call cases like Wigal's miraculous; people with injuries like hers almost never open their eyes again. She would later speculate that, even through the opaque fog of her comatose state, she was somehow aware of the presence of her loved ones in the room with her. Although medical science can't say for sure, perhaps her many well-wishers did make a difference.

In somewhat less miraculous ways, however, dozens of studies show that having the people in our lives really does matter. Psychologists Kathyrn Herbst-Damm and James Kulik, for instance, wanted to see if social support really could make a difference when life and death were at stake. In one study, they followed 290 terminally ill patients from the moment they entered hospice care to the time they died. About a third of the study patients requested and received visits from hospice volunteers, while the remaining two-thirds didn't. The rate at which the visited patients passed away was almost a third that of those who were not visited; the lives of visited patients lasted on average two and a half months longer.

For Wigal, while waking up was already a miracle, recovery would require another. Everything was foggy. Names, faces, and places floated like flotsam in her mind, unanchored to meaning or context. When she spoke, words spilled from her mouth in a gush of broken sounds.



Amanda Wigal, Saguaro Butte Lake, Arizona: After she awoke from her coma, Wigal started speaking in French, a language she studied in college.

Now that she was awake, fewer friends came around, because they didn't know how to help. Her needs seemed too great for them to meet. Much research documents a complex dance between sufferers and helpers following tragedy. Psychologists Krzysztof Kaniasty of Georgia State and Fran Norris of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, for instance, have studied the impact of help after collective tragedies like hurricanes and floods. A heroic phase of disaster support follows virtually every catastrophe. But after the initial period of help, organizations and individuals generally cut back on the assistance they give. Despite the best of intentions, it's hard to be heroic all of the time.

In Wigal's case, her friends distanced themselves after the initial outpouring of support. But oddly, she never felt any sense of estrangement; she remained confident that support would always be available. What made the difference was her close relationship with her mother, Iris—a bond that had taken on deeper meaning after Wigal's father died when she was just 20. Also, Schlosser remained patiently encouraging throughout her recovery. The two worked hard with Wigal, who had to relearn everything from basic human functions like brushing her teeth to reading and math.

Wigal, in fact, could not remember a lot of things. She didn't remember, for example, that she had been a sales manager for a small promotional- products supplier, Brandables, that the job had been less than satisfying, or that she had decided to stay with the company because the owner had retired and sold it to her. Unfortunately, Brandables had suffered great losses during the recession, which began shortly after Wigal's injury. Once she discovered that she was indeed the new owner, rebuilding the business became a tangible goal that inspired her year-long recovery.

She realized she had to take action, so while still recovering, she made the first painful decision: to lay off employees. She also stopped paying herself. There she was, alone in a silent 2,000-square-foot space filled with lifeless racks and shelves. How would she fulfill the purchase orders? With her memory still weak, she had to make client orders visible; she hung whiteboards in the hallways, displaying orders in process. She operated the packing stations, went to trade shows, and became a member of the chamber of commerce. Meanwhile, her mother, always behind her, took up duties at the sales counter.

Because of the reliable efforts of her mother and fiancé, Wigal never felt abandoned. "I never once sensed I was alone," she says. Their constancy bolstered her perception that support would be available for as long as she needed. In the end, Wigal was able to make her company a top promotional-product distributor in Arizona, and 35 months after the accident, she and Schlosser were married.

Regardless of how many people surrounded Wigal, two in particular were always there for her. And believing that someone is by your side—someone you can count on—is one of the great secrets to supersurvival.