

CHALLENGES & ADVERSITY

In life, I've faced plenty of other challenges and adversity. There's been heartbreak and betrayal, setbacks and failures, crushing losses and bitter disappointments, health issues and money problems. But that's life.

No one gets a free pass. None of us are guaranteed a perfectly pleasant journey free of hardship and struggle and pain. While my story is a little more dramatic than some, it is far LESS dramatic than others. There are plenty of people who have had experienced far worse challenges, far bigger obstacles, and far more dire circumstances. And the only thing I really know for sure, is that there is certain to be more obstacles, struggles, and setbacks in my future, and in yours. Adversity is a part of life. The only question is: what are you going to do about it?

What are you going to do to keep yourself going, even when the going gets rough? How are you going to dig deep and find the grit and the gumption to persevere? Those are big questions, without easy answers. But I think it starts by taking three small but critical steps in the right direction.

STEP #1

UNDERSTAND THAT THE ONE THING YOU CAN CONTROL IS YOU.

No matter how early we set the alarm or how much prep work we try to do the night before—packing lunches, signing off on homework, setting out clothes and putting backpacks and instruments next to the front door—those thirty minutes between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m. seem to always devolve into chaos, yelling, and tears.

It's roughly the same scene that plays out every morning, our own personal version of Groundhog Day. Annie won't get her butt in gear. Maggie gets more and more irritated. There's yelling and screaming and crying and slamming of doors. And usually a lot of pushups, our punishment of choice.

More than once, Maggie has come to me in tears, frustrated to a level that only a sister conflict can reach.

"Why does Annie have to be so annoying? She never does anything! We're going to be late again! Why do I have to suffer because of her? It's not fair!" And the thing is—Maggie is absolutely right. It's not fair at all. Annie has many, many good qualities, but her ability to get herself moving in the morning is not one of them, at least not right now, and most mornings she is 100 percent to blame. As a parent, I'm still holding out hope that this is a phase she will someday grow out of, but for now, this is our reality. Because, as I have to explain to Maggie on a regular basis, life isn't always fair.

"Honey, the only thing you can control is you. I know it's not fair, but that's just what happens sometimes. And while you can't choose how your sister acts, you can choose how you respond. If you let this ruin your day, you will only be hurting yourself, not her. You have to choose to move past it."

It's a tough pill to swallow when you are eleven. But it's a lesson that is just as hard for adults.

The reality is that bad stuff is going to happen to you at some point, sometimes through no fault of your own. There are going to be people who treat you badly, or who take advantage of you. There will be lots of sucky things in life that you can't do anything about. And at the end of the day, the only thing you can control is the way that you respond. Will you let it ruin your day, or your week, or your life? Or will you choose to move on?

STEP #2

REALIZING THAT THE JOY IS IN THE STRUGGLE

In fact, so often we are caught totally off guard or completely blindsided when something unexpected gets us off track. And then, because we are caught so off guard, we are easily devastated and discouraged. We don't know how to handle the obstacle or roadblock that confronts us because we haven't mentally prepared for it.

But I can tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only sure thing in life is that things will go wrong. We've all heard of Murphy's Law, the idea that "anything that can go wrong will go wrong," but for some reason, we are still upset or surprised or devastated or angry when things don't turn out exactly the way we expected to, or when we make a mistake or encounter some major roadblock or obstacle.

We think "that's not supposed to happen!" and we feel sorry for ourselves, sometimes even throwing ourselves a big fat pity party. But why are we so surprised? Bad things will happen. Things will go wrong. Mistakes will be made, over and over again. People will be jerks sometimes. Accidents and tragedies will come out of nowhere. Roadblocks and obstacles will pop up. And the only way we can stop being a victim of our circumstances, and a casualty of the things that go wrong—because they will go wrong—is to stop expecting everything to go right.

STEP #3

JUST TAKE ONE STEP, AND THEN ANOTHER

You don't need to know every step along the way before you begin, you just need to take the next one, and then the next one after that. Action is the antidote to fear, which means that as long as you keep moving in the right direction, as long as you keep taking action towards the goal you want to reach (even if that goal is just identifying a goal!), you will get there someday.

Courage, then, is just like a muscle that needs to be strengthened each day. Courage is a daily decision. It is a conscious choice to take that next step, and then to take the next one after that.

It's the decision to just keep going, no matter what.