Resilience has been a theme for the Public Garden community and recently BHS invited Bob VandePol to speak on behalf of Resilience and Growth; how institutions bounce forward. Bob has a long career in crisis management. His team managed CCN’s Command Center in Manhattan after the 2001 terrorist attacks and led teams in response to high-profile tragedies including the Boston Marathon bombing; Aurora, Sandy Hook, and Las Vegas shootings; natural disasters, and our nation’s prominent university-based tragedies. He frequently consults with businesses, universities, schools, and cultural institutions regarding how leaders can accelerate organizational recovery following crises. To learn more, please see our recorded video presentation with Bob VandePol and BHS insurance at bhsins.com/video-resources titled Bouncing Back & Bouncing Forward, May 19 2022.

Bouncing Forward by Bob VandePol

Regarding growth and mental strength, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Do you find that to be true? Maybe sometimes.

A variety of factors, conditions, choices, and behaviors contribute to the fact that for some people, a major life stressor or series of stressors can produce a victimhood that severely limits their lives. These individuals do not get stronger. They remain stuck in an identity tied to the stressor, which may be a traumatic event, diagnosis, disability, or other hardship. It often remains difficult for them to see themselves as more than that stressor. (I.e. “I am a victim of military trauma/abuse/a bad boss/an assault/the economic downturn, etc.”)

These events ARE difficult but when a person allows such events to solely define the rest of one’s life, they become perpetually, irrevocably victimized. And yet, another group of people seems to rebound quickly to a life-status seemingly similar to their prior lives. These resilient people are more likely to identify themselves as survivors than as victims. Their focus is more upon the future than the past. They acknowledge the impact of the stressor and move forward with the help of social support and survival tactics.

And then there is the group Nietzsche referenced. When studied over time, these “SurThrivers” don’t just move forward, they actually become stronger. Growth and distress co-exist and lead to meaningful positive life changes.

This group was also noted to make intentional, brave choices; to lean into the pain rather than either wallow in it or sprint blindly away from it. For example, when families lose a loved one there is a risk of fragmenting the family. Some will grieve by talking prolongingly about their loss and being reluctant to move on with life. Others wish to move on quickly to avoid pain and to re-establish some control.

So, do we grieve or do we move forward? SurThrivers move forward, though not without sadness for what’s been lost never to be regained (i.e. innocence, naivety, carefreeness).

Numerous studies (especially Tedeschi, Calhoun, and others) call this Post Traumatic Growth and have identified five domains that differentiate those who not only bounce back, but bounce forward. Again, SurThrivers intentionally focus upon these domains and thereby grow.
The Five Domains of Post Traumatic Growth

1. **Greater appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities.**  
   Perspective changed including an increased appreciation for life in general, and many smaller aspects of it, along with a changed sense of what is important. As you have gone through hardship, have you noted appreciating things or people that were easily taken for granted before? Have you changed priorities and perhaps discarded some things that had been too important?

2. **Warmer, deeper relationships with others.**  
   These relationships tend to be deeper, characterized by less superficial conversations and by greater compassion for others going through hardship. SurThrivors were more generous, volunteered and donated more. Have you deepened important relationships? Edited your social circle?

3. **A greater sense of personal strength from making it through the stressor.**  
   SurThrivors were able to look back at the hardship, integrate it as part of but not all of who they are, and gain confidence from it in anticipation of present and future challenges. It served as a “monument” to survival. Have you identified personal or family triumphs over hardships? What did you do in these circumstances that worked? Have you studied challenges met and overcome by ancestors or other historical figures?

4. **Recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life.**  
   When life is proceeding routinely it is easy to fall into the rut of “this is how we have always done it.” Life stressors sometimes make those thoughts and actions unavailable and ineffective. Necessity is the mother of invention. Have you learned something new in your professional and personal life? Do you now have new skills that you may not have developed when operating “inside the box?”

5. **Spiritual development.**  
   SurThrivors leaned into their pain and asked the tough existential questions about their Faith, world-view, and things they had always trusted. They reported gaining greater meaning in their lives, connection with that which was most important to them, and the likelihood of leaving a greater legacy.

   Do difficult circumstances cause you to search out and reflect upon deeper issues? What have you read, listened to, or with whom have you had these conversations?

Life is not fair. Sometimes life is really, really difficult. There are many factors and circumstances over which we do not have control. SurThrivors seize that over which they do have some control and produce growth which positively impacts not just themselves but those around them.
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Founder of VandePol Crisis Response Services LLC to function as an independent contractor focused upon Crisis Leadership, organizational resilience, and Crisis Response consulting, training, and delivery. Formerly served as Executive Director of Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services' Employee Assistance and Church Assistance programs where he leveraged behavioral health expertise to support healthy, productive people and groups. Developed Resilience programs in partnership with healthcare, law enforcement, and fire safety organizations. Prior to joining the Pine Rest team, he was President of Crisis Care Network, helping to lead it from a startup to the world's largest provider of Critical Incident Response services to the workplace. Active as a keynote speaker, Mr. VandePol has published and been quoted in business and clinical journals, co-authored book chapters addressing workplace response to tragedy, and has been featured as subject matter expert in numerous video training series.

For more information, contact a member of the BHS Insurance Public Garden team at 800-350-7676.