

Start Small, Start Now: Daily Ways to Build Resilience by Heleo Editors

“Most people define resilience as recovering from a hurricane or a divorce, a big thing. If you define it as small, you can improve.”

Amy Cuddy is a social psychologist at Harvard Business School, the author of the bestselling book *Presence*, and a speaker whose TED Talk is the second-most watched of all time, with 39+ million views. She recently joined Bonnie St. John, former Olympic champion skier, speaker, and author of *Micro-Resilience*, for a live Heleo Conversation about overcoming challenges great and small. Amy, who suffered a traumatic brain injury as a teenager, and Bonnie, an amputee who lost her right leg at age five, spoke frankly about their own experiences, discussed the importance of hour-by-hour strategies for resilience, and talked about how they renegotiated their relationships with fear.

This conversation has been edited and condensed. To view the full conversation, click the video below.

Amy: Both of us have overcome life-altering, body-altering, mind-altering challenges. But both of us have come to be very interested in not the big challenges, but the small challenges that people face on a week-to-week basis.

How did you get from major life challenge to these little challenges?

Bonnie: We got interested in micro-resilience because we were looking at research about why certain tennis players always win. It's what they do between the points, those little recoveries, that give them the edge.

If you hang around Olympians, they're always looking for that little extra thing. You're going to dinner and they're like, "I know a better place to sit. I can get seats a little closer."

If you hang around lawyers, they argue. If you hang around investment bankers, they're all looking for the typo, because that can cost them a million dollars. Olympians, it's what is that little thing that's going to make me a little better? Because that's how you make the big change, by a series of little changes. How about you?

Amy: That's part of it, but it's also that parents of people who have had traumatic brain injuries email me and ask, "How did you do it? What's the formula?"

I don't exactly know, but I can put together the little pieces, the steps—that's where I feel like I can help, thinking back over how I got through it.

Bonnie: Similarly, everyone always wants to know, "You're so resilient. You overcame not only having your leg amputated, but abuse in childhood. How can I be more resilient, too?" I want to give people practical things you can do every day that make the powerful changes. It's more motivating to do the little things.

Most people define resilience as recovering from a hurricane or a divorce, a big thing, and so people say, "It's hard to be resilient." If you define it as small, you can improve.

Amy: That's right. I often talk about New Year's resolutions. I think of them as macro-challenges; people decide at 11:50 p.m. on December 31st, "I'm going to make this big change." Guess what? By the end of January, every media outlet has some big headline about why New Year's resolutions fail.

We go through this again and again, and fail because there are a million steps between you now and that New Year's resolution version of you. Just like any tennis match, a New Year's resolution is a series of tiny wins and losses, but we somehow think of it as a singular thing, and so we fail and we quit. Why not instead think of it as process and break it up?

Bonnie: Are you good at it? Are you good at presence, and at dealing with anxious situations?

Amy: I don't think calm people write books about anxiety. I'm getting better, but it's hard. I love public speaking more than anything, and I used to hate it more than anything. If I had heard somebody say this 10 years ago, I would have thought they were full of shit, but I honestly feel more relaxed speaking to audiences than I do in any other context.

Bonnie: What you've changed most for yourself is to shift from being in threat mode, defensive mode, to being in trust mode?

Amy: I would say so, and getting there is very visceral. My anxiety has always been very visceral. I remember, waking up from the head injury, I felt like my body was buzzing, that there were currents of electricity going through me. Everything felt over-stimulating.

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Being aware of the anxiety in my body and imagining that expanding allows me to release it—that's the image I have. I hear from clinical psychologists who use expansive posture to decrease negative mood and increase memory. Their clients say that when they expand, they can't hold on to the negative thoughts. They almost don't want to let go of them, because when you're depressed, you sort of want to hold onto that. It feels like your only truth.

The idea from the 2012 talk is much bigger than standing like Wonder Woman for two minutes in the bathroom. It's about carrying yourself in a way that is expansive, with a sense of power and pride and poise, doing that unapologetically. It's about sharing your ideas. It's about slowing down, taking your time, speaking slowly, taking longer strides when you move.

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Bonnie: I have a really visceral memory, too, of coming home from the hospital the first time that my leg was amputated. I spent most of first grade in the hospital, and then came back to school to see my friends.

I had one crutch and my new artificial leg, and I was walking on the playground with my best friend. All the other kids were staring, and some were following us around. I remember the feeling: “You’re the crippled kid, you’re weird.” I thought, “If everyone’s following me and staring at me, I’m going to wave like Miss America.”

Amy: You were [recently] talking about another [similar] moment, when you were an adult. Can you tell the story?

Bonnie: My daughter was about three or four years old, and I had promised I would take her to the aquarium in La Jolla, a really posh part of San Diego.

Long story that I won’t explain, but I ended up going in curlers. I was wearing a leg like blue titanium—I’m interracial, and my daughter is blonde with blue eyes, so everybody always asks, “Are you the nanny?”—[so] I’m going into the aquarium looking like Robo Nanny. As we walk in, I get faced with this wave of emotion, and it’s not warm and friendly. It’s disdain, disgust, disapproval. Walk into the first room, and there’s this wave that hits you. You go around the corner and a new wave hits you. My daughter’s oblivious. She’s like, “Sea anemones, yay.”

It would have been really easy to say, “This is really hard. I’m not doing this. I’m going home.” It’s that same feeling of when I was a little kid and walked onto that playground. When I talk about confidence, it’s very visceral. It’s, “I’m going to keep my posture straight. I’m going to look you in the eye. I’m going to smile, and I don’t care if you have disdain.”

I talk a lot to minority women about that, because we show up differently. People don’t just feed us confidence. In fact, when I was working on the confidence chapter with my husband, who is a white male, he didn’t understand what I was talking about, because he doesn’t have to face that feeling of people looking at you like you’re not worthy, and how you have to stand up into that.

I have a very visceral understanding, as a person with a disability and as a minority woman, that we have to carry ourselves like we matter. It’s not easy to do that when the people around you aren’t giving it to you.

What I’ve had to learn from my own work is not to be such a type A person. Maybe because I’ve had so many things to overcome, I’m like a sledgehammer: drive it until you drop it, push myself until I fall over. I didn’t have the option of just being normal.

“I stand at the top of a ski hill and go 75 miles an hour on one leg. It’s not that you’re not afraid, you just do it anyway.”

A friend of mine once said, “Wow, you really never back down from fear.” I looked at her and said, “There was an option?” I realized I had never thought about that until that

moment. I lived so much with fear as my friend.

Amy: What do you mean by that?

Bonnie: You just do it anyway. I stand at the top of a ski hill and go 75 miles an hour on one leg. It's not that you're not afraid, you just do it anyway. I started to learn that I didn't always have to be that way. That's part of what's in your work too, how to let go of fear and operate from some other place.

Amy: It's a huge commonality. I always attract the students who are not the mainstream students, the ones who feel like they're outsiders.

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I grew up in Amish country. I went to a school where only a third of my class went to college. I paid for school at a state school as a roller skating waitress. I never felt like an insider at any of these places, Princeton or Harvard.

I attracted those students. What I thought when I first started talking to them was, "I've just got to get them through this weird place that is Harvard Business School, where half of your grade is participation." They don't have to internalize it, they just have to get through it, and that was where the "fake it until you make it" thing came from.

The first student, who said, "I can't participate," I got her talking, and on the last day she spoke, and it was amazing. I keep in touch with her. She said, "I have become the best version of myself. I slowly felt myself dropping this shield that was preventing me from being who I am." She wasn't faking it. She was only faking it to herself, to get through to becoming herself.

My favorite quote about power is from Robert Caro, Lyndon Johnson's biographer. Someone once asked him, "Does power corrupt?" He said, "Power does not necessarily corrupt, but power always reveals." I love that.

Bonnie: It makes you more of who you are.

Amy: For better or for worse. I think, for most of us, for better. This idea of pretending until you become your best self, you really do become your best self—not just to serve yourself, but to serve others as well... You're a sledgehammer, but you're a sledgehammer for all of us.

What are your favorite micro-resilience strategies?

Bonnie: Everything in [the book] is instant gratification; that's what's fun about it. It's hour by hour, not "What do you do on average?" One thing that's really changed is exercise. We all think, "I should exercise three times a week for an hour, and I'll stay in good shape."

If I have a big day, where I have to get to a big presentation or I have a big report due, we think, "I exercised yesterday, and I'll exercise tomorrow, but today I'll focus on what I've got to get done." The research shows when you do a little bit of exercise, it actually makes you smarter for hours afterwards. You access your memory better. You make better insights. You generate more ideas.

It's macro versus micro, too. [For example, staying hydrated]. You say, "I should drink six glasses of water a day," and you're probably good at that. When you're under stress or trying to perform, your habits go out the window. That's when you're worst at drinking water. The brain is a higher percentage of water than the rest of your body, so you can actually feel it, like your head is fuzzy. If you just drink water, you're going to get better brain performance. There's a lot of studies about kids drinking water before tests and doing better.

The micro thing is about what's going to help you right now. Drinking water is one of those things, studies show, that's going to help you in the next hour.

Amy: Right, it's not people going, "How am I going to make partner? Drink water now." You can't have that as the goal as you're thinking about these things. Water is so simple. Why do we resist those things?

"When you're getting that runaway train feeling, one way to slow it down is to label what you're feeling, to say, 'I'm frustrated' versus 'I'm angry' or 'I feel drained' or 'I'm helpless.'"

Bonnie: It's that we're so well-trained to think of macro. Micro-resilience is a lot of little things across a spectrum. There's brain things, metabolism things, purpose-oriented things, anxiety.

When you have anxiety, it's like your emotions are on a runaway train. Matt Lieberman from UCLA did fMRI brain scans and showed that when you're getting that runaway train feeling, one way to slow it down is to label what you're feeling, to say, "I'm frustrated" versus "I'm angry" or "I feel drained" or "I'm helpless." You don't have to do it out loud. You can just do it in your head. The fMRI brain scans show that it reduces that runaway train reaction.

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Amy: Anxiety [is] a high-arousal, negative emotion. A colleague of mine, Alison Wood Brooks, is a great singer, and she doesn't feel a lot of stage fright, but she learned to get over that as a kid.

When she became a psychologist, she realized that anxiety and excitement are both high arousal emotions, but one is negative and one is positive. She put people into stressful situations, like singing competitions, public math exams, and debates, and would have them either say, "I am anxious," or "I am excited." When they said, "I am excited," and they re-labelled the high arousal emotion from negative to positive, they overcame it and performed incredibly well. They harnessed the high arousal part, and got rid of the negative part.

It's very hard to change the arousal level, but it's easier to change the balance from negative to positive or vice-versa. First you have to go, "I am feeling fear. Wait, maybe it's actually this other thing." My son, he's a quiet kid, but he plays guitar and gets up and he can play with bands on the stage with a thousand people in the audience, and be totally relaxed, because he now thinks of that anxiety as excitement about the thing he loves doing. He now goes, "Oh, I'm not anxious, I'm just so excited to do this."

Can you share one of the stories that you find the most inspiring, and that makes you the most hopeful?

Bonnie: I'm most well-known for telling the story about falling down and getting up at the Olympics. I was in the slalom race, and I finished the first run and I was in first place. It was an upset. I was the third-ranked woman in the U.S. Nobody expected me to beat my teammates, never mind everybody else in the world. I was in first place, going into the second round of the slalom. It's a new course—you don't see the same course twice—and the women in front of me were crashing. They said, "There's a really dangerous, icy spot on the course." I thought, "I don't even have to go all-out. If I just stay standing, I can win the gold."

I went down, and I fell. I got up, and I got over the finish line. I thought I'd failed, but I still won the bronze medal, because everybody on one leg fell down. People fall down, winners get up, and sometimes the gold medal winner is just the person who gets up the fastest. The woman who won that race didn't beat me on the first run. I was the best skier when nothing went wrong. She got up faster than I did. She was the quicker getter-upper.

I've told that story in a lot of places, and hearing people come back to me and say, "I can get back in the game. I failed, but I can get back in the game. I can get back into my marriage. I can take the LSAT again," that's why I write about resilience. Some of the most inspiring stories are people who say, "I can try again." In today's world, it's not if we're going to fall down, or if things are going to go wrong. It's, how good can we get at bouncing back?