

Up on the High Wire: How to Bolster the Mental Resiliency of Our Student Leaders

Guidelines for Advisors and Mentors of the Millennial Generation

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The brave young leader takes a deep breath and plants a bold foot upon the high wire. The foot wobbles a little and the leader feels a transitory catch in the throat before leaving the security of the platform and planting another foot one step ahead on the wire.

“Must not show hesitation or trepidation,” the young leader thinks. “Head up and smile. I can do this.”

The fear is quickly replaced by exhilaration. Knowing that many are looking up and in awe of this death-defying feat, the leader’s heart beats strongly and the mind focuses on the task at hand. Shouts of encouragement and admiration can be heard below.

“What a wild ride! People are depending on me and believe I am up to the task.” thinks the leader. “I can’t imagine doing anything else. I can’t let them down!”

Then someone yells from the platform, “Oh! We forgot to tell you. You must juggle these plates as you try to keep your balance. Just a couple, no worries. We know you are up to it.”

The leader turns back and catches the plates tossed into the air and starts to juggle. Despite the distraction, the leader continues on, defying the tension in the gut. Powering through one step and another, looking confident and smiling outwardly, the mind of the leader starts to chatter.

“Perhaps this is too much for me. Maybe I was not ready after all. I can’t really turn back now. Where is that safety net?”

The voice from the platform yells out again, “Here are some batons ablaze and a unicycle. I am afraid these are now yours to deal with as well.”

The sweat dripping down the temple of our leader now gives the internal state away. Suddenly, our leader feels alone and trapped with no way down. The audience below is nothing but a silent, dark abyss.

“Are they just waiting for me to fall?” Our leader wonders. Just then the voice from the podium shouts, “I am sure it will just be a temporary thing, but now I must request that you wear this blindfold.”

Even though high performing leaders often exude confidence, they are also human and in many ways more vulnerable to the sometimes impossible expectations placed upon them by themselves and others. It’s no secret that when work needs to get done on campus, many people entrust it to the busiest students around. As resources get tighter and tighter, everyone is just trying to manage more with less and mental resiliency becomes the key to survival.

As a faculty member, advisor, and mentor, I have seen countless student leaders new to these stresses who wonder if they will be up for the challenge. I tell them, they are not the only ones to feel this way. Throughout history, pressures and self doubts have crushed even the most remarkable leaders. To name a handful of many whose leadership careers intersected with emotional distress:

- **Sir Isaac Newton** suffered bouts of insomnia and was so sensitive to criticism he was considered by many to be paranoid.
- Although there is some controversy, most historians believe that **Meriwether Lewis**, the famed explorer of the Lewis and Clark team, took his own life after a professional public humiliation that led to increasing agitation.

- **Marie Curie** was considered an obsessive genius, and after winning her second Nobel Prize in science, she was hospitalized for severe depression.
- **Winston Churchill** battled what many consider bipolar disorder and referred to his mood swings as his “black dog.”
- **Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin**, one of the first men on the moon, experienced debilitating depression and alcohol dependence upon his return, which was attributed in large part to the unexpected impact of fame.
- More recently, **Mike Wallace** anchor for *60 Minutes* acknowledged life threatening depression after an accusation of libel and a related lawsuit. He stated,

At first I couldn't sleep, then I couldn't eat. I felt hopeless and I just couldn't cope...and then I just lost all perspective on things. You know, you become crazy. I had done a story for *60 Minutes* on depression but I had no idea that I was now experiencing it. Finally, I collapsed and just went to bed.¹

- Even **Terry Bradshaw**, Pittsburgh’s Man of Steel admitted that he almost “worked himself to death” as a coping strategy for mental pain.

I tell the student leaders, that if they struggle with the stresses of being a leader, they are certainly not alone. In fact, most likely because of their struggle and pain, not despite it, these world famous leaders transformed their dark nights of the soul and found a greater calling in life. Many of them have now turned to help other high performers find their way through difficult times.

Why We Should Care About Mental Resiliency for Student Leaders Today

Mental resiliency is like a mental muscle that helps you bounce back from life stressors; it’s the idea: “that which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” People who are mentally resilient are able to see past adversity and maintain high levels of functioning despite chaos and disruption. In contrast, less hardy individuals often succumb to feelings of victimization and become immobilized by hopelessness. Being resilient doesn’t mean powering through impossible expectations or suppressing feelings of anger or sadness. It does mean having the ability to adapt to stress and ultimately to grow from it.

Unfortunately, leaders of all stripes have been conditioned to think that the only acceptable outcome is perfection and a fully packed resume. This belief leads them into what the authors of *The Wounded Leader*² describe as the “conspiracy of busyness.” From a young age, talented children learn to build a mask to hide any imperfections, lest they disappoint parents and teachers. The development of this outer shell inevitably makes it more difficult to get in tune with their inner emotional lives and true selves. Because many find themselves on a rat race to the impossible, young leaders can be initially devastated when their lives are sidetracked by personal or professional adversity. In addition, the authors of *Wounded Leader* argue, the psychic needs of the leader are not always met by the roles of the leader, and this discrepancy can often cause feelings of disillusionment and disappointment. Small cracks in the mask often lead to maladaptive coping strategies like high risk drinking, sexual acting out, and eating disorders as a way of either temporarily soothing the internal dissonance felt or unconsciously punishing the self for being imperfect. Underneath the mask we find what the authors call the

“inner face” or the “whole-hearted soul” of a person that is trying to engage others in this thing called leadership.³ It is this whole-hearted soul we seek to uncover, because as the poet David Whyte⁴ once wrote, “the antidote to exhaustion is not rest; the antidote is wholeheartedness.”

Like top performing athletes, today’s student leaders must learn to develop this muscle of mental resiliency to grow from these challenges and sustain their talents and passions over the long term. Our Olympians don’t become champions overnight – they require daily conditioning to develop strength and avoid injury. Our top leaders’ mental resiliency is developed in the same way, through daily practice and a focus on the long-range plan for leading an extraordinary life.

Our young leaders also need to develop mental resiliency to effectively lead others who often have less developed coping skills. Leaders calibrate the emotional states for the followers. In other words, leaders are often the epicenters of stress reactions among their peers. When they crumble, others lose hope about their own ability to manage as well. Knowing the increasing levels of mental health issues facing college campuses today, it is not a matter of if our student leaders will face emotional challenges, but when.

Our Millennial Students: Are They Weak or Are They Warriors?

On one hand, the millennial generation is more vulnerable to stress than others. By now, many of us have heard much bad news about this new wave of students infiltrating our campuses:

- **Dreams dashed:** Fueled by parental ideals of perfectionism, the millennials are a highly ambitious generation: 81% of 18-25-year olds say their generation’s most important goal is getting rich and 51% want to be famous⁵. However, many have unrealistic expectations about what it takes to achieve success⁶.
- **Overwhelmed:** In 1985 only 16% of first year college students told the annual University of California freshman norms survey they felt, “overwhelmed”: now that figure is 30%⁷.
- **Strapped:** ¾ of full-time college students are holding down jobs and almost half are working 25 or more hours per week⁸.

While I agree that these trends are discouraging and true for many students, I also see amazing gifts. After almost thirty years of being part of a higher education community, I can tell you there is much to celebrate about this generation. In the late 1980’s when I went to college, there was a culture of obedience in the classroom. You complied with faculty expectations, completed the assignments given without question, and listened intently to lectures day in and day out. There was a duplicity between what we were learning and how we were living, and there was very little talk of the Common Good. Because of this conditioning, Gen Xers, like me, are slower to warm up to the process of demanding change. We have led few social movements, had few high-profile transformational leaders, and are generally focused on just getting through it all.

Millennials are different, and they inspire me everyday. Take Ashley, for example. When Ashley came to Regis University, she made a bee line straight for the leadership development program. You see, as a high school student, Ashley had already started a community service organization delivering toys to Mexico. Since that time she has become fascinated by the concept of social business and hopes to make her living leading a clothing company that helps eradicate the problems of child labor. Or look at Ryan. Ryan is disillusioned with corporate culture. After

completing a very prestigious internship at a local corporation, he decided many leaders take themselves way too seriously and would benefit in many ways from learning how to play again. For his leadership capstone project, Ryan designed a retreat program for workplaces that helps participants reconnect with the joys of play and the depths of spirituality, knowing that these practices help cultivate a more fully functional human being. Drew created a calendar that generated revenue for a local nonprofit while at the same time increased awareness of mental health issues through beautiful stories of hope and recovery told through photographs, drawings, and paintings. Roxanne developed a model of microcredit loans for a local bank in Denver. Brianna researched health issues in indigenous people in the U.S. and New Zealand and now helps other students go abroad to do the same. And the list goes on and on.

These students were successful because they found deep meaning in their academic pursuits. They thrived because they were allowed the freedom to develop a course of study that had relevance to them. They performed beyond expectations because they were self-motivated to put their name on something that mattered. Many of them are deeply passionate about meaningful social matters – like the war, diversity, and the environment. And, as we have seen with their tremendous impact in the Obama campaign, they have skills in social networking and technology that can move mountains.

I am not the only one who sees the silver lining of this amazing generation. Tracy Knofla⁹, author of *Thriving in Chaos* and a national speaker on student engagement also believes all that we are missing the boat with all the doom and gloom discussion about this new generation of leaders, “They are adaptable and will figure it out for themselves – institutions of higher education need to allow for more flexibility in systems to help these students thrive. They will do it – just maybe not on our time frame.”

Indeed, what I have noticed about these students is that they vote with their feet. If they don’t feel inspired by something, they go do something else. And for that I respect them deeply. They may take a number of rabbit trail excursions along the way; it’s all part of the journey. From what I see, they are going to revolutionize higher education – after all, they are the consumers. And if higher education can build upon students’ strengths, offer them meaningful options, and personalize their curricula, the consumers will go elsewhere. I see that my job is to just help give them some tools to put in their backpack as they charter their latest expedition. The good news is that there are many ways campuses can bolster mental resiliency.

Top Ten Strategies for Bolstering Mental Resiliency among Student Leaders

1. Scan the environment. If we are really committed to making systemic change to help our students thrive, we must look at what the signals and cues from our environment are telling our community. All the sleep skill and time management workshops in the world won’t undo an overwhelmed population, if every cue in their environment is telling them do more with less, do more with less, do more with less. Environmental scans require a beginners eye – either bring in someone new to your campus or really open your mind up to looking at your environment as if you’re an investigator living 50 years from now, coming back to visit this campus with the task of understanding why all the students got so stressed out. Then walk around like an anthropologist and take notes – what are the messages in the campus media? How does the campus’ ebb and flow during the year contribute positively or negatively to a thriving community? Who are the heroes? What are the rituals? How does the community talk about stress and coping – faculty, students,

and staff? What are the policies that impact the community related to stress? What are other cultural cues that might be sending explicit or implicit messages about stress and coping?

From this process you can assess your campus' assets and needs when it comes to fostering a mentally resilient and caring community. By collecting this data, you will be in a better position to craft targeted strategies to bolster the protective factors and reduce the risk factors for stress.

2. Model emotional intelligence and mental wellness. As advisors and mentors, we get that our students are overwhelmed, but so are we. I was just at a conference, where the presenter asked a room full of student life professionals if within the last 12 months they had ever felt so overwhelmed it was difficult to function. Every hand went up. I certainly struggle with this every day. As a working parent trying to juggle a full-time job, and part time nonprofit work, I am committed to making my practices of mental wellness a priority just to keep afloat. Sometimes I am successful; sometimes I get sucked under. For me a main difference between my attitude on mental health now versus when I was in college, is now I really care about wellness because I know that it will sustain me. So, while I am far from perfect, every day I make it a goal to workout, meditate, eat and hydrate well, and address conflicts in my relationships. If the work I "need" to do doesn't get done because of these things, oh well. The world keeps on spinning.

When I work with my student leaders we talk about the Jungian archetype of *The Shadow*, or that part of our personalities that we learn to suppress as we develop and then come out in ways that have us repeating dysfunctional patterns over time. Paradoxically, often our shadows are the dark side of the gifts we bring to the world. Knowing that my shadow is the dark side of my gift of passion and energy, I am very aware that I have a vulnerability toward overwhelming others. As part of my modeling mental wellness, I acknowledge this tendency openly and ask others to give me feedback on when it starts creeping into the equation.

3. Normalize and integrate mental health. It is curious to me that as Americans start to climb on to the wellness bandwagon, they often leave mental health off on the side of the road. Fitness and nutrition programs are seen as core components; however, unless we address mental wellness issues, we often find the fitness and nutrition programs are difficult to maintain. Everything is related once we become committed to promoting the health and well-being of the whole person. Mental and emotional health and disorder should be treated in the same way as other physical issues – in a matter-of-fact way, with the same amount of resources, and with the same amount of dignity. A mentally resilient community understands that insomnia is not often just a physical problem; it frequently has underlying mental health components. Changes in weight and changes in energy, again, often show up as medical issues, but might be manifestations of a larger issue in brain chemistry.

On a similar note, mental health practices can all be thought of as normal every day activities that we do to keep ourselves mentally fit – it may be taking medication, seeing a counselor, setting limits, journaling, sharing concerns with a friend, meditating, or learning new coping strategies. When people find what works for them – it's a cause for celebration.

4. Offer easy access to an array of services. On one hand, counseling centers are increasingly finding themselves inundated by referrals, many of which are high intensity cases. On the other hand, there are some students that no matter what we do, they will not voluntarily seek help from a mental health professional. Additionally, not all students in distress actually need psychotherapy or psychotropic medication. They might need financial assistance, spiritual guidance, or academic tutoring. Thus, we need to make sure we have a wide continuum of services to offer our students, and we need to think of a way to triage the students so that they are matched with the right type and level of assistance. If our message is that students who struggle should seek help, we have an ethical obligation to ensure that the systems of help-giving are up to meet the demand.

On-campus, services to help bolster mental resiliency obviously include Counseling, but might also involve University Ministry, Financial Aid, the Office of Disability, Residence Life, Campus Safety, the Dean's Office, and more. Because resources can change quickly, someone on campus should be keeping up with creating off-campus referral sources as well, including sliding scale counseling, support groups, hotlines, and so on. Of course, consideration for cultural competence is another critical factor in a successful referral. Screening programs can be particularly helpful in identifying students early in the process of trouble, but a screening result without a follow up plan, is not useful. So, screening programs should always result in some type of recommendation for the participant.

5. Foster multiple identities and offer flexibility and freedom. No, "multiple identities" doesn't mean creating split personalities among our students. It means encouraging growth in several directions. When we put all our "eggs in one basket" – whether it be the basket of a relationship, academic success, or athletic accomplishments – we set ourselves up to be vulnerable. If all of my identity is just within one dimension of my life and something happens to that basket – all my eggs are broken, and I am devastated. Just like our financial portfolios, we need to diversify.

Three strategies play a role in the success of this goal. First, finding **balance** between work and play, between activity and rest, and between knowing, being and doing, is key to expanding multiple areas of interest. Second, and one of my areas of vulnerability, is pursuing areas of interest with a mind of **moderation**. Seeking greatness is admirable, but if you are trying to be the top scholar in your class as you run for student body president and at the same time train to win a marathon and publish a book – something is going to give. Sometimes just good enough is fine, but many of our high performing students have been conditioned to think that only excellence and perfection is allowable. Finally, **variety** can help buffer against the single-source identity. In other words, it doesn't really make a difference if a person is "diversifying" by being a basketball player, a soccer player, and a weight lifter. One major injury and all of those activities can get wiped out. Chris Lowney ¹⁰ the author of *Heroic Leadership* talks about "living with one foot raised." In other words, leaders succeed by finding opportunities in uncharted territories, and then experiment by getting involved in things slightly out of their comfort zone in the spirit of constant evolution of the self.

6. Train students in life skills. Because many have been raised by helicopter parents who often took care of things for them, today's students sometimes lack basic life skills and benefit greatly from workshops that teach money management, sleep hygiene,

relaxation, time management, and so on. Knowing that students' schedules are already completely overloaded, these skills training sessions must be handled with care otherwise they may inadvertently increase stress rather than reduce it. Rather than offer them as an additional thing to put in their daily plan, find ways to dovetail the development of these skills into things the students are already doing.

Two important life skills to consider are communication skills and how to help a friend. Many of us are keenly aware that we are often the last to know when a problem is bubbling. In a recent survey by Chris Brownson¹¹ at the University of Texas, researchers discovered that of students who admitted they had been suicidal 67% first disclosed their troubles to a peer and only 23% first disclosed to an older adult like a parent or professional. Thus, we need to train students to learn empathic communication and warning signs and risk factors for despair, dysfunction, depression, and even suicide. Many effective models for this training exists and helps decrease the bystander behavior that often allows people to fall from the cracks.

While there are many life skill components to list under this topic, my section here is purposefully short, because this is often what campuses think of as a first line of intervention; however, these skill training activities are often not part of a larger strategic planning process and are often not sustained, making them ineffective over the long haul. Life skills training is more effective when there is some loop of practice, feedback, and correction over a period of time.

7. Engage student leaders in the cause of mental health advocacy. Okay, I admit it, this suggestion is a little unorthodox, but bear with me, because it works. I currently teach a developmental series of leadership classes to the undergraduates at Regis University – the first class is called “Leading Well” – a course on how components of wellness contribute to leadership development, “Leading with Differences in Mind” – a course of diversity and leadership, and “Leading in the Global Community” – a course of macro social change and leadership. Because of my passion for mental health advocacy, each class has a component where we focus on these issues. The first class helps them think about their own mental wellness, the second course gets them to think about how emotional intelligence affects group processes, and the final class considers mental health advocacy as a case example of how social change occurs. At first, some students are a bit confused about what is going on, but once they see the relevance to their own lives and those that they care about, they become forces to be reckoned with. By positioning mental health issues as social justice issues, many become very excited about making a difference in this work. When they become leaders of this cause, they often are continually examining their own mental health so that they can be models for the work.
8. Explore the wisdom of the crucible. *Ad Astra per Aspera* (to the stars through adversity).¹² Leadership studies forefather Warren Bennis¹³ studied many great men and women and found that those who learned from their darkest days were often transformed into even better leaders than they were before. He called these experiences crucibles in the lives of these leaders because crucibles are vessels that turn base metals into gold, or in the case of leaders, fiery ordeals into magical experiences.¹⁴ Many of our young leaders have not experienced life's great traumas by the age of 18, and if they have, many have not fully worked through all the lessons to be learned from

those experiences. Leaders often believe that if they just work hard enough or ethically enough or smart enough, they will rise above the inevitability of being wounded. Sooner or later, they are rudely awakened to the fact that no one is immune, especially those who live in the messy life of leadership.¹⁵

Understanding that wounding is inevitable and part of the cycle of leadership can allow the young leader to respond with grace and consider the experience as a potential catalyst for the next stage of greatness. For those who have worked through the wounding, many find that it served as a wake-up call to the true self and historically in the story of one's life this earth shattering experience can often become a touchstone, bringing the leader into a wiser perspective. Without this insight, our wounded leaders can easily become indefinitely entrapped in the bitterness or humiliation of the wound.¹⁶

9. Increase a sense of belongingness. Miller McPherson¹⁷, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Arizona and Research Professor of Sociology at Duke University, published a very compelling study with his colleagues that gave strong evidence that our true social networks are shrinking. In other words, he wanted to know about how many confidants, or people we could share anything with, existed. He compared the number confidants from 1985 to 2004 and found that in 1985, the modal respondent had at least three confidants, and by 2004, that number had shrunk to only one. When we only have one person with whom to share the inner most thoughts, we are highly vulnerable should anything happen to that relationship. The group to lose the most social connection: young, white, educated men. Thus, creating caring communities and decreasing social isolation can help our students increase their bandwidth of support.
10. Help students in their search for meaning and connect to the relevance of their college education. Finally, as mentors and advisors, one of our greatest joys can be to help students find how their talents and passions match up with the needs of the world. My friend, colleague and fellow speaker Kevin May says, "it's where your deep gladness meets the world's deep sadness." Our students crave this, and by helping them find this path, we can then help them connect the relevance (or not) of all the things they have on their over scheduled plate, so that they can be more selective in lining up the things that will help them successfully reach their goals while keeping up their mental resiliency. Once they get a compelling mental picture of what this future will be like, they will be unstoppable because they will have the bubbling energy inside that boils over, helping them through the dark nights of the soul and catapulting them into authentic greatness.

The young student leader looks out again from the platform. This time the high wire has transformed into a footbridge...with handrails. The safety net is clearly in view, and the audience is lit up encouraging our leader and handing over equipment to ensure a successful passage across.

A voice from the platform yells, "are you sure you don't want to spin some plates on your journey?"

To which our young leader replies, "No thank you, I've got my bags and my map and am setting out on an adventure of a lifetime. No spinning plates needed."

About the author: Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas is a psychologist and the Director of Leadership Development at Regis University. She became passionate about mental health advocacy and its relation to leadership following the suicide death of her high performing younger brother in 2004. Currently, she is the Project Director of Regis' Garrett Lee Smith Suicide Prevention Grant as well as the Executive Director for the Carson J Spencer Foundation (www.CarsonJSpencer.org), a Denver-based nonprofit "sustaining a passion for life" through innovative and effective suicide prevention programs. Dr. Spencer-Thomas is a professional speaker who travels to campuses around the country sharing a message of hope and activism (www.CAMPUSPEAK.com).

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