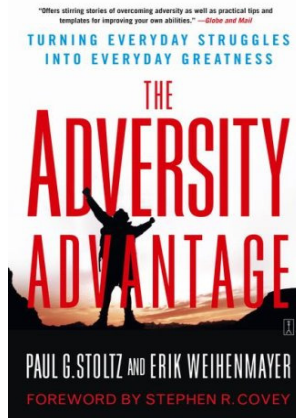


The Adversity Advantage

Turning Everyday Struggles Into Everyday Greatness



Authors: Paul G. Stoltz and Erik Weihenmayer
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■ The Big Idea

In learning to harness adversity to benefit oneself and others, Stoltz and Weihenmayer propose Seven Summits:

Summit 1: Take it On! - Define your adversities and face them head on.

Summit 2: Summon Your Strengths - Determine what you want to do and what strengths you will need to develop to do it.

Summit 3: Engage Your CORE - Use your CORE to handle adversity more effectively.

Summit 4: Pioneer Possibilities - Develop systems to meet challenges and goals.

Summit 5: Pack Light, Pack Right - Avoid the people, things, and circumstances that are not uplifting and strengthening.

Summit 6: Suffer Well - Elevate yourself or others through hardships.

Summit 7: Deliver Greatness, Every Day - Integrate the previous summits and harness adversity daily.

Features of the Book

Reading Time: 10-12 Hours, 283 pages

Adversity – those events that have the potential to negatively affect an individual or those he or she cares about – is unavoidable. Everyone, from highly successful CEO's to the average American, experiences adversity to different extents and under different circumstances. What differentiates highly successful individuals from average individuals is the way they confront adversity. Although individuals do not have a choice regarding whether or not they will face adversity, they do have a choice in determining how they will respond in the face of it. And this choice can make all the difference in terms of their future growth and potential.

In **The Adversity Advantage**, Stoltz and Weihenmayer teach readers how to harness adversity and use it to grow and benefit themselves and others. The book is a unique combination of theory, exercises, and personal anecdotes. Heavier on the latter two components, the book has a highly practical and applied focus. Much of the personal experience component is due to the contributions of Weihenmayer, who infuses actual stories of how he harnessed adversity in his teams' mountain climbing feats, throughout each chapter. In contrast, Stoltz takes the lead discussing concepts, theory, and exercises. The exercises, which are abundant and useful, are designed to allow individuals to apply the theory and research described by Stoltz. These exercises should not be overlooked, for by doing so readers will lose a great deal of the application of concepts.

The Adversity Advantage starts out strong with an excellent foreword written by Stephen R. Covey, renowned author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Although it may be tempting to skip the foreword, it is strongly recommended that you resist this temptation. Covey does a superb job of setting the stage for Stoltz and Weihenmayer's discussion of

adversity, and he clearly provides praise for the importance of their work. Following the foreword is another important section that sets the stage for the book: the introduction. In this section, the readers will find an overview of the sections of the book as well as a rationale for the topics.

After the introduction, each chapter is devoted to one “Summit” in the authors’ metaphorical mountain climb. Within each chapter, the narration shifts between the two authors with a symbol (a pickax) indicating when the transition occurs. The chapters generally begin with examples of the concepts from Weihenmayer’s mountain climbing feats, followed by an introduction of the concepts and then numerous application exercises. Each chapter is infused with numerous useful figures and blank worksheets for the exercises. Finally, the last page of each chapter is devoted to a simple and easy to glance at summary page.

Suitable for anyone seeking to improve themselves and those around them, this book has a universal appeal. It is a well-written book, although due to the sheer number of concepts introduced and exercises within each chapter, it may benefit the reader to spend significant time reading and completing the exercises. If the magnitude of exercises and concepts is overwhelming, it is recommended that readers focus on one Summit at a time until they feel comfortable to move on. The book would be best read from cover to cover, although readers can later refer to certain topics using the index.

Introduction

Adversity is an inevitable aspect of human existence. Despite widespread recognition of the pain and suffering that accompany adversity, its potential benefits are largely neglected. When harnessed correctly, adversity has the unique power to help individuals to transcend their current levels of performance, innovation, energy, and personal satisfaction.

In **The Adversity Advantage**, authors Paul Stoltz and Erik Weihenmayer use the metaphor of the Seven Summits to represent the inspiration and challenge inherent in harnessing adversity. At each summit, the authors provide exercises, information, and strategies to help individuals better understand adversity and utilize it for their benefit. This metaphor is close to heart for Weihenmayer, a living embodiment of harnessing adversity, who became the first blind individual to climb the seven highest mountain peaks on the seven continents (the Seven Summits). Together, Stoltz and Weihenmayer capitalize on the uniqueness of their experiences and knowledge to present a captivating account of how to transform pain and suffering into growth and development.

SUMMIT I: TAKE IT ON!

Adversity is a powerful word, and one that potentially might arouse varying conceptions and emotions. But what exactly is adversity? There is a continuum of adversity invoking events, ranging from mild hassles to catastrophic setbacks. As a result of this wide variation, the authors define adversity broadly as, “Adversity occurs when something negatively affects, or is predicted to negatively affect, someone or something you care about.” Although adversity can be fatiguing, draining one’s livelihood and spirit, when harnessed correctly it can result in increased strength and energy.

The **Adversity Continuum** is a model that depicts the range of responses individuals can have to adversity and the resulting outcomes. There are five steps on the Adversity Continuum, and the authors discuss each through both description and personal stories from Weihenmayer’s life:

1. *Avoiding* – It is instinctual to avoid situations that might cause hardship, and a primary mechanism for doing so is through denial. Weihenmayer experienced this as a child, when he tried to convince himself that his diagnosis was incorrect and he was not

losing his vision. Although denial can allow one to temporarily reside in a comfortable state, it is exhausting, can create negative emotions, and only avoids the inevitable.

2. *Surviving* - Upon reaching this stage, individuals may feel relief from abandoning the avoidance that was exhausting them. The goal at this stage is to simply make it through each day standing. Although this is an important stage, being stuck here can also be grueling, and the ultimate goal is to move to the next stage.
3. *Coping* - There are numerous ways, both useful and destructive, that individuals can attempt to deal with adversity. More useful mechanisms include venting, exercising, and taking breaks, whereas more destructive methods include drinking, blaming, and complaining. In Weihenmayer's situation, he attempted to cope by telling himself that he'd just have to live with, and learn to accept, his blindness.
4. *Managing* - Managing adversity involves minimizing its detrimental impact on one's life. For example, Weihenmayer uses various strategies for managing his adversity for effectively, including a guide dog and a talking computer.
5. *Harnessing* - This most productive level involves using adversity to elevate oneself and others. In the face of adversity, it may seem inconceivable that anything positive can come from the situation; however, although it is not an instant process, it is achievable.

Each level on the continuum builds on the weaknesses of that before it. Although individuals often fluctuate from level to level, the goal is to spend less time in the lower levels and more time in the higher levels. It is important for individuals to assess and reflect upon where they most often lie on the continuum when faced with adversity.

It is clear that harnessing adversity can be a powerfully uplifting experience. So, how do individuals seize the opportunity to harness adversity, elevating themselves in painful situations? The first step is to identify a Summit Challenge and a Summit Adversity using the **Adversity Inventory**, a seven-step process.

1. *Step One: Categorize Your Life* - Begin by listing all of the categories in life that are important. These may include family, friends, interests, or health.
2. *Step Two: Declare Your Aspirations* - For each life category identified in step one, identify two or three things you would like to accomplish but have not.
3. *Step Three: Prioritize Your Pain* - For each life category identified in step one, identify the top two or three adversities causing the most pain.

4. *Step Four: Pick Your Adversities* - Within each life category, select the one adversity that, if addressed, has the greatest potential to breed energy in your life.
5. *Step Five: Pinpoint Your Summit Challenge* - Select the one aspiration identified in step two that is most compelling.
6. *Step Six: Select Your Summit Adversity* - Select the one adversity that, if harnessed, has the greatest potential and that you are sure to face in addressing your Summit Challenge. This is called your Summit Adversity.
7. *Step Seven: Clear the Trail* - Identify the excuses and reasons for inaction toward your Summit Challenge.

After completing these seven steps, individuals must commit to “turning into the storm.” In essence, this means being proactive rather than waiting for reality to force oneself into action. Although turning into the storm will likely be difficult, and the temptation to return to a complacent state of denial will be strong, it is essential to push forward and keep an end goal in mind.

SUMMIT II: SUMMON YOUR STRENGTHS

It is common for individuals to seek tasks they naturally excel at, avoiding tasks that are more challenging. Although this can result in personal success, failing to admit or attempt tasks in which one does not excel limits personal growth. For these reasons, Summit Two not only addresses harnessing one's strengths, but also developing and summoning new strengths that can be used in the midst of adversity to grow and succeed.

So, how does an individual determine what strengths may be helpful in harnessing adversity and reaching his or her Summit Challenge? The authors suggest that strengths are defined by a simple formula: Will + Skill = Strengths. In this formula, Will represents the sheer human desire to complete a task. It is essentially a combination of effort, determination, desire, and decisiveness. Skill, on the other hand, represents the actions that an individual performs relatively well. Whether innate or learned, skills need to be developed and refined.

The authors provide an exercise that involves applying the Strength Formula to an individual's personal Summit Challenge. Doing so prompts individuals to answer several critical questions including why they want to undertake the challenge and what skills and strengths they already possesses or need to develop.

Interestingly, there are two unique forms of strengths: Regular Strengths and Adversity Strengths. The former term refers to the strengths an individual demonstrates under everyday conditions, whereas the latter term refers to the strengths an individual exemplifies in the midst of pressure or a difficult situation. For some individuals, their Regular Strengths and Adversity Strengths are roughly the same in everyday and adversity situations; for others, however, they are entirely different. Individuals who have strength overlaps in both types of situations are said to exhibit integrity – a sense of wholeness or completeness. In contrast, individuals who do not have strength overlaps may be perceived as unpredictable or irrational. The goal is to minimize the differences between one's Regular Strengths and Adversity Strengths.

No matter how well an individual has done in the preceding tasks – such as sorting their strengths and defining their Summit Challenge – individual strengths are always limited. Therefore, it is often beneficial to work with a team whose collective strengths can result in more success than individual strengths alone. However, not just any team will suffice; it is critical to select a team that will fare well in the midst of adversity. To do so, the authors suggest going for a team with AWE.

The A factor in AWE represents the strengths team members will bring forward in the midst of Adversity. The authors provide an exercise entitled the A Factor Snapshot

designed to provide an estimate of a person's A factor. The W factor represents Why an individual is in pursuit of a goal. It is always preferable to select a team member whose Why is authentic and uplifting rather than self-centered or meaningless. To assess the Why factor, simply ask the potential team member why he or she would like to be a part of the team. Finally, the E factor represents one's Ego. Although the word Ego often carries negative connotations – namely self-centeredness or arrogance – the authors propose that a large ego in itself is not bad as long as it accurately represents one's actual strengths and contributions. The best way to assess Ego is to compare individuals' self-reported strengths and contributions to the reported perceptions of others who witness the individuals on a frequent basis.

SUMMIT III: ENGAGE YOUR CORE

Summit Three teaches individuals how to engage their CORE. An individual's CORE is derived from his or her Adversity Quotient (AQ), a measure of how an individual reacts to adversity. Essentially, an individual's CORE determines whether he or she will win or lose in a battle with adversity.

The C in CORE stands for Control. All individuals seek some degree of control over the circumstances in their lives. Regarding adversity, the key question is to what extent an individual perceives he or she has control over what will occur next. In order to engage one's CORE it is important to focus on those aspects of the adversity that an individual can potentially influence, rather than those that are beyond one's control.

Ownership represents the O in CORE. When an individual demonstrates ownership over a situation, he or she steps up and becomes involved in a situation to help make things better. According to the authors, "Ownership is often about doing the right thing, even when it's not the required thing, or the thing for which you are evaluated." Individuals can engage their CORE by asking themselves what they can do to affect an adversity immediately and positively, as opposed to worrying or thinking about it.

Reach, the R in CORE, describes the degree to which an individual perceives an adversity as being catastrophic. It is important to minimize the perceived fallout from adversities. This can be done by engaging one's CORE and asking what can be done to minimize the downside of the situation or maximize the upside.

Finally, the E in CORE stands for Endurance. It is important to assess how long an individual thinks the adversity will endure. Individuals who perceive an adversity as temporary are more likely to work through it and use it to improve themselves. Individuals can engage their CORE by asking how they can get through the adversity as quickly as possible.

It is important for individuals to begin practicing and strengthening these components of their CORE. Although there are multiple ways to achieve this end, the authors suggest that heightened awareness with feedback from multiple sources is one way for individuals to identify their weaknesses and develop their strengths. The authors provide an instrument that can be used to this end: the self-administered CORE panorama. To use this instrument, an individual first lists the people who have the greatest opportunity to observe them dealing with adversity across a variety of settings. Then, he or she will ask these individuals the questions on the panorama, and should be receptive to their feedback.

Once an individual's CORE is built, it is important to continue to engage it. Weihenmayer is a superb example of someone who continuously engages his CORE. In his own words, "By focusing on what I can influence, taking action to make the best of tough situations, working to minimize the potential downside and maximize the upside, and working relentlessly to get through suffering, I have been able to shatter my own perceptions of what's possible."

SUMMIT FOUR: PIONEERING POSSIBILITIES

Pioneering possibilities entails using inventiveness and resolve to excel at challenges that others may see as insurmountable. According to the authors, "It is only by attacking our personal challenges with a pioneering spirit that we can drive our own lives forward and even shape the destinies of our organizations, our communities, and the larger society." There are three steps to using adversities to pioneer possibilities, resulting in personal growth: (1) select a Worthy Goal, (2) create a system to meet the goal, and (3) execute the system when it counts most.

Despite the illusory simplicity of choosing a Worthy Goal, it can actually be quite a difficult task. Historically, it is recommended that individuals select goals that are specific, realistic, and achievable. When selecting a Worthy Goal, however, the authors suggest abandoning such criteria. Although appropriate for everyday goals, they are too limited to apply to Worthy Goals. Instead, when choosing Worthy Goals, it is important to examine one's motivation, strengths, and excitement related to the goal.

Once a Worthy Goal has been identified, it is important to develop systems for reaching that goal. Specifically, the authors refer to Signature Systems, personalized systems that are used to achieve a goal. According to the authors, the highest quality Signature Systems involve PROPS; they are: **P**ortable, **R**eplicable, **O**riginal, **P**ersonal, and **S**imple.

After developing a Signature System, it is important to practice it in multiple situations. No Signature System will work flawlessly at first, and there may be numerous failed attempts before a worthy version is discovered.

Once the previously mentioned steps are taken – a worthy goal is defined, a signature system is developed, and the system is practiced – then one can begin writing his or her pioneer story. Pioneers are individuals who have worthy goals and then use PROPS to reach these goals.

Weihenmayer is a compelling example of an individual with a pioneer story, which he presents in the book.

SUMMIT FIVE: PACK LIGHT, PACK RIGHT

Just as Weihenmayer noted that it is critical to “pack light and pack right” when climbing a mountain, so too must individuals do so when faced with adversity. If individuals pack light and pack right, ridding ourselves of competing priorities and distractions, they will be better poised to deal effectively with adversity. As stated by the authors, “...when you are constantly drained by sheer weight, it’s nearly impossible to move toward being great.” Summit Five teaches individuals to repack – their stuff, time, work, and self – in order to facilitate their movement up the Adversity Continuum. The first concept addressed is repacking one’s “stuff.” Although the majority of people strive endlessly for more material objects, these items often do more to weigh people down than to elevate them. Despite more material objects and luxuries than ever before, more than half of Americans report that life is getting worse. The key is that more possessions does not necessarily lead to more happiness; in contrast, it most often leads to more complexity, less time, and less ability to address challenges.

There are two questions individuals need to ask themselves regarding their stuff. First, it is important to consider whether they have too much stuff. Unnecessary stuff is not inherently bad, but becomes so when they impede your worthiest goals or highest efforts. People who achieve greatness tend to use their money to elevate rather than accumulate material goods. So, how does one determine how much stuff is enough? A good rule of

thumb is, “Exactly as much as it takes to do the thing you’re meant to do.” Beyond that, additional stuff can only add complexity to your life and detract from your goals.

The second question an individual needs to ask regarding his or her stuff is whether or not it is the right stuff. An individual should strive to possess only those things that are essential, and not simply pleasurable or desirable, in accomplishing their goals. Essentially, the right stuff includes those things that most enable an individual to do what he or she is meant to do in life.

Although stuff has the largest potential to derail an individual’s efforts to seek Everyday Greatness, time is another potential obstacle. Time involves how an individual spends his or her life, and it is easy to fall prey to spending such time worthlessly. One only need to consider the number of hours the average individual spends watching television programs or aimlessly surfing the Internet to see this fact. Despite the apparent pleasure gained from these activities, the more time an individual spends engaged in them the less he or she will be able to harness adversity. The authors provide an exercise for critically examining what time obligations an individual should lighten to increase his or her efficiency and energy.

Work can also impede progress towards one’s goals.

Although most work settings involve adversity, they also allow individuals the opportunity to engage in everyday greatness. Individuals who approach work merely as a waste of time or a source of income are failing to seize an opportunity to enrich their life with energy. In contrast, individuals who harness the adversity omnipresent in work can become elevated and transformed.

Finally, neglecting one’s self can also have negative consequences. It is important to invest time in ourselves – namely our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being – in order to be better able to harness adversity. As Stephen Covey noted in the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, it is important to “sharpen the saw,” renewing oneself in these areas to maximize effectiveness.

The authors provide a Packing List that will help individuals examine whether they are packing light and packing right in each of the four previously mentioned domains. By using this tool, individuals can determine how they need to repack to maximize their effectiveness.

SUMMIT VI: SUFFER WELL

Suffering is inevitable and its existence is often outside of one's control. What is controllable, however, is whether an individual suffers poorly or suffers well. Suffering well, however, painful it may be, has the potential to propel an individual to greatness. Without suffering, it is difficult to feel the importance of great achievements.

Before describing what it means to suffer poorly or suffer well, it is first necessary to have a solid understanding of the concept of suffering. According to the authors, "To suffer is *to endure something painful*." Specifically, the authors suggest the components of suffering can be described by the acronym STRIP: **S**everity of the pain, **T**ime or length of the pain, **R**elativity of the pain to others around the individual, **I**mportance of the pain to an individual, and **P**rice you stand to pay for the pain. These five factors can STRIP an individual down to his or her true self, resulting in the potential for growth and reenergization.

Rather than suffering well, individuals often fall prey to certain "coping mechanisms." Despite their potential for good and their universal appeal, these mechanisms become destructive when overused. The coping mechanisms include:

1. **Whining** - There is a difference between voicing concerns and whining; the latter is characterized more by inaction and venting.
2. **Complaining** - this does have a purpose: to help us understand and move past our negative feelings. The problem occurs when this mechanism is overused, resulting in weakness.
3. **Blaming** - When we blame, we fail to see our own responsibility and learn from our mistakes.
4. **Identifying** - It can be tempting to convert suffering into part of our identity, making it difficult to leave behind.
5. **Anesthetizing** - It is common to numb ourselves from the pain we experience- either through medication, the Internet, alcohol, or television.
6. **Escaping** - Although it may be tempting to escape suffering through postponement or procrastination, the reality is that, "you can run but you can't hide."

7. **Rationalizing** - Although it helps us make sense of our lives, rationalizing can also cause individuals to fail to see possibilities.
8. **Denying** - This involves refusing to acknowledge the presence of pain in order to avoid dealing with it.
9. **Pretending** - When we act as though pain doesn't exist – despite the realization that it does – it can result in denying others the opportunity to learn or grow from our suffering.
10. **Whitewashing** - A subtler version of pretending, whitewashing involves portraying the appearance that circumstances are better than they actually are.

The authors distinguish between four types of suffering. Physical suffering, when our bodies hurt, tends to be the most obvious and discussed type of suffering. Emotional suffering, on the other hand, involves pain caused by such feelings as anger, anxiety, envy, hatred, or love. Mental suffering describes the difficulty in identifying the best solution to a significant problem. Often caused by a specific situation, the potential solutions to the problem are often unresolved or missing. Finally, spiritual suffering describes a sense of faithlessness, purposelessness, hopelessness, or aloofness with the world. This type of suffering can either be dull and chronic or severe and immediate.

Despite the categorization of these forms of suffering, it is important to note that most people who suffer exhibit a combination of two or more these types. Once an individual understands these types of suffering, he or she can complete the “suffer check” included in the book to gauge the type and degree of suffering he or she is experiencing.

So, what is the difference between suffering well and suffering poorly? According to the authors, bad suffering occurs, “...when the experience makes us less rather than more.” For example, becoming mean or selfish as a result of suffering would constitute suffering poorly.

Suffering well has the opposite effect – it elevates the individuals and others around him or her. In the corporate world, suffering well may be characterized by withstanding barriers – long hours, rejection, backstabbing, or drudgery – in search of a novel breakthrough or cause. More generally speaking, the authors describe suffering well as, “...suckling on the rich nutrients of life's bitter defeats, and emerging more powerful, formidable, and focused as a result.” One of the most noble things individuals can accomplish, suffering well involves transcending your feelings to do what needs to be done.

SUMMIT VII: DELIVER GREATNESS, EVERY DAY

In Summit Seven the authors discuss how to compile knowledge gained in previous chapters to deliver what they call “everyday greatness.” Different from epic greatness, everyday greatness involves using virtues – such as resilience, compassion, and integrity – to elevate oneself and others in the midst of adversity.

In order to determine how to deliver everyday greatness, the authors provide exercises to examine how others an individual admires do so. Despite wide individual differences, there tend to be strong similarities in how the people whom individuals admire most deal with adversity. For example, these individuals tend to: (1) harness their adversities and score high on the Adversity Continuum, and (2) exemplify the principles of the Adversity Advantage daily.

Once an individual has identified everyday greatness in others he or she admires, it is important to devise a personal Everyday Greatness game plan. There are two distinct approaches to this game plan. The first path – called the Singular Challenge – involves developing everyday greatness tools and applying them to reach an individual’s Summit Challenge. The second path – called the Multiple Challenge – uses the same tools to address the multiple pains and adversities an individual identified in his or her Adversity Inventory (Chapter 1). Deciding which path to take is a personal choice that may depend to some extent on the sources of one’s pain and potential fulfillment.

After determining which path to take, the next step involves creating an everyday greatness game plan. This involves closely examining each summit discussed in the book, and critically asking questions such as:

1. **Summit 1** - What behaviors do I need to cease? What behaviors do I need to practice? If harnessed, what one thing would most significantly impact myself and those around me?
2. **Summit 2** - Which of my current strengths will be most useful in relation to the challenge? What strengths do I need to develop? What is my most compelling reason for undertaking the challenge? Who should – and should not – help me address the challenge?
3. **Summit 3** - How can I engage my CORE to maximize its positive impact? What role has my Adversity Quotient played in addressing the challenge?

4. **Summit 4** - Am I focusing on the right challenge? What goal sparks my strength, excitement, and motivation?
5. **Summit 5** - Am I packing light and packing right? What do I need to discard or reduce? What do I need to add or shift in priority?
6. **Summit 6** - How have I suffered in the past? What changes do I need to make to ensure that I suffer well in the future?

The authors provide a template for creating one's Everyday Greatness Game Plan. Once the Game Plan is complete, the true challenge consists of implementing it. Although sticking to any plan can be difficult, the authors suggest that this plan is different and critical because adversity influences every aspect of life. Consequently, harnessing it correctly can provide individuals with improvement across all domains of their lives. They conclude with the thought that, "Greatness is potently contagious." Thus, not only can it infuse into other aspects of one's own life, but also into the lives of those around us.

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