

Encouraging Courage

by Thomas Hammerman, MLIS, MSMFT

What is the common factor uniting the people in the following three scenarios?

- *A lifeguard, at great risk to her own life, rescues a man drowning in rough surf after many other people had tried and failed.*
- *A 9-year-old child with learning disabilities cries her heart out because she does not want to go to school on the day of a big test. The girl recovers, goes to school, and faces her test.*
- *A man goes to work, knowing that any day he might be laid off.*

The common factor in these scenarios is courage. Contemporary daily living takes a great deal of courage – without it, it is very easy to get lost, stuck, or overcome with fear. In today's age of modern science, when it is not easy to rely solely on faith, courage may be a key ingredient of human resiliency.

Defining courage

Courage is remarkably difficult to define, but perhaps the most influential definition was

proposed by Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (translation, 1984), he defined courage as the observance of a rationally-determined mean between excessive fear and excessive rashness. That is, a person with courage assesses a situation rationally and acts according to a balance between fear and confidence. Aristotle encouraged us to become aware of our natural inclination towards cowardice or foolhardiness, because we can compensate for our inclination if we are aware of it.

Aristotle believed courage can be practiced by enduring situations that evoke fear. A person who is overly fearful can practice courage by doing things that feel rash or dangerous. For example, if a person knows he is afraid of being embarrassed in public, he should force himself to try to do things in public that make him embarrassed. By using this strategy, Aristotle believed a person will find a healthy balance between fear and confidence.

Modern researchers have tried to develop implicit definitions of courage by studying how people evaluate courageous behavior. In a 2007 study, Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, and Sternberg concluded that courageous action is a complex, multidimensional concept involving four necessary components. The first, intentionality/deliberation, means that courageous action involves a willful, intentional act executed after mindful deliberation. The second component of courageous action is that it involves known, personal, and substantial

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risk to the actor. Third, courageous action is primarily motivated towards a worthy purpose or noble end. Finally, courageous action is often undertaken despite a personal experience of fear.

The difference between general courage and personal courage

The above definitions are helpful, but a problem arises when we consider the actions of the girl with a learning disability facing her test. The girl certainly demonstrates courage, but her actions do not involve an objective or substantial risk. Taking a test may be stressful, but it doesn't entail the same life-threatening risk as the lifeguard saving the drowning man. Because of this, some researchers (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007) distinguish between "general courage" and "personal courage."

General courage can be described as fearless or confident courage demonstrated while facing great risk of bodily harm, as was the case with the lifeguard. On the other hand, personal courage is a specific attempt to overcome one's own fears or limitations, like the girl facing her test. Because general courage involves being at the right place at the right time, it is difficult to practice. However, personal courage can be practiced all the time by knowing (and facing) our fears and limitations. In this way, personal courage does not need to be monumental, nor is it just the domain of heroes. Everyday people are able to be courageous.

In their study, Pury, Kowalski, and Spearman (2007) found that greater fear was reported in situations of personal courage, but greater confidence was reported in situations of general courage. Their research showed that personal and general courage are not opposite ends of a continuum, but rather are two distinct but related dimensions.

Factors that influence courageous behavior

What makes one person more likely to engage in courageous behaviors than another? A fascinating study conducted by Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky (2007) investigated differences between two groups: 1) non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust and 2) non-Jewish European residents during World War II who were not perpetrators themselves, but who were bystanders because they did not help Jews or other members of persecuted groups. Gentiles who helped Jews during the Holocaust not only put their own lives at risk over an extended period of time, but often risked the lives of their families as well. The study found that rescuers could be distinguished from bystanders “on the basis of their ability to subscribe to the personal norm that requires people to help others who are dependent on them without the expectation of gain, because it is the right thing to do” (p. 144). In addition, rescuers had an exceptional capacity to feel compassion for those who experience pain or suffering. Unlike bystanders, rescuers had empathy and compassion for others outside their identity group. The rescuers had the ability to identify with and embrace people of a group outside their own.

What accounts for the gap between knowing the right thing to do and actually doing it? While it is easy to believe Jews should have been rescued during the Holocaust, actually providing assistance in the face of substantial risk was much more difficult. The Dalai Lama (2002) addressed this question when he made an important distinction between two types of compassion: the wish to *see* others free from suffering, and the wish to *help* others be free from suffering.

A study by Walker and Frimer (2007) found that the gap between knowing the right thing to do and actually doing it seemed to be associated with people’s personality traits. Courageous people had a sense of personal responsibility for moral actions,

and believed their integrity was at stake in moral action. Courageous people also had life stories that involved helping others. They were likely to view their life experiences in positive ways, and they made conscious choices to construct some benefit or positive outcome from negative and difficult situations. Finally, courageous people tended to have a moral identity – that is, they believed their beliefs on morality were essential to their self-understanding.

Becoming more courageous

Courage is an important part of everyday life. Living and participating in the world takes an enormous amount of courage. The more courage one has, the better one can face and change the world for the better.

There are many ways to learn and practice courage. People can volunteer for a worthy cause – for example, working in a food bank or helping the homeless – which will help develop courage and empathy. Therapy is also a place to learn and practice empathy. A good therapist models empathy in every session, and can teach clients to have greater empathy for themselves and others.

Therapy is also a great place to learn and practice courageous behavior. People can learn about themselves and their personality in order to identify their natural inclinations. Therapy can also help a person face situations which provoke fear or apprehension. It can be a place where people heal from hardships they have experienced in their past. Finally, therapy can help people feel stronger as a result of facing adversity, rather than retaining a feeling of defeat.

Developing courage has a double benefit. First, developing courage makes people stronger, and their lives more enjoyable. Second, the development of courage contributes to making the world a better place for others.

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Author Biography

Thomas Hammerman, MLIS, MSMFT, is a postgraduate clinical fellow at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. He specializes in work with couples, families, and

individuals. He is also a member of the Family Business Program at The Family Institute. Tom enjoys helping people find and develop the courage and skills to make positive and lasting changes in their lives.

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