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book club synopsis

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Supersurvivors:
The Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success

David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz

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Nearly everyone will face a difficult or even traumatic event at some point in their personal or professional life. Some recover and return to "life as usual"; for others, living becomes a perennial struggle. But for a third group, trauma represents an opportunity for rebirth, transformation and greater success. In *Supersurvivors: The Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success,* David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz examine what makes these people different and what others can learn from their experiences, with or without a traumatic catalyst.

The following is a chapter-by-chapter synopsis that is designed to help you dive quickly into the content of the book. We hope that this will allow you to extract the greatest insights from it in the most efficient manner possible and help you find the sections of the book that will be of most value to you.

About the authors

David B. Feldman is considered to be among the top experts on hope in the field of psychology. An associate professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University, he holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Kansas. Feldman is also the author of two previous books and has written for the Huffington Post.

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chapter one:

to survive or to supersurvive

Setting a narrative pattern that recurs throughout the book, *Supersurvivors: The Surprising Link Between Suffering and Success* opens with the story of Asha Mevlana, a 24-year-old breast cancer survivor who, after surgery and chemotherapy, studied improvisational violin, moved from New York to the West Coast and became a successful electric violinist. She has toured with Dee Snider (Twisted Sister), Mary J. Blige and Jay-Z, and today is the lead violinist of the Trans Siberian Orchestra's West Coast Tour. When her doctors gave her a clean bill of health in 2002, Mevlana felt that her life was empty and prayed, "Just give me a second chance, and I'm going to change my life." Leaving a job in the tech industry behind, she instead pursued her dream of becoming a rock violinist.

Bouncing forward: Mevlana is an example of what David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz deem "supersurvivors"—people who, instead of just recovering and returning to their lives after a cataclysmic event, "move beyond mere resilience," radically deviating from their previous life paths to transform "the worst thing that's happened to them into the best."

Turning suffering into personal triumph: The authors make clear that they are not extolling tragedy nor claiming that trauma is healthy for people. Rather, recognizing that trauma is part of the human experience, they draw upon research from numerous fields to look at how suffering leads to change. The following chapters examine how:

- Hope has little to do with positive thinking.
- The disorientation experienced after trauma can ultimately be advantageous.

- Some delusions can be healthy.
- Perception of support from others affects outcomes.
- Forgiveness is good for an individual's physiology as well as for the soul.
- Religion and spirituality can help or hinder.
- Reflecting on death can lead to a better life.
- Choice plays a role in moving forward after trauma.

Learning from ordinary people: "Traumatic events are extraordinary," writes Harvard Medical School professor Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, but "not because they occur rarely." Annually, 13 million people are diagnosed with cancer, 10 million experience traumatic brain injuries and 50 million survive auto accidents. From this perspective, trauma is an ordinary thing that happens to ordinary people living ordinary lives. Yet, as Mevlana's story demonstrates, these are the people who become supersurvivors. Note Feldman and Kravetz: "Almost every one of our survivors insisted that we clearly and pointedly communicate this fact. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things."

What would you do if a crisis hit close to home? "Supersurvivors provide unexpected answers to this question," conclude Feldman and Kravetz. "Their stories offer hope that trauma can lead to growth and transcendence, and that fear of tragedy doesn't have to cause us to shrink from a full and adventurous life." Mevlana's trauma "freed her," seemingly giving her direction, and "in this book," write the authors, "we discover why." Furthermore, Feldman and Kravetz's research explores how, with or without a traumatic event, "every one of us can live more fully."

chapter two:

the paradox of positive thinking

In 2008, former Royal Navy sailor Alan Lock became the first registered blind person to row across the Atlantic Ocean. With the assistance of a companion, a compass and a GPS unit, Lock paddled his way into the Guinness Book of World Records after he had to abandon his military career due to macular degeneration. While many attributed his achievement to the so-called "power of positive thinking," Lock disputes this and believes that his pessimism was the secret sauce behind his success. Some people pushed him to look at the bright side of his loss of sight, suggesting, for example, that his hearing would become more acute. But, remarks Lock, "there were no positives in losing my sight." His pessimism, which led him to be realistic about his situation, "was the only way to move forward."

In a similar vein, competitive marathon swimmer Maarten van der Weijden was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in 2001 and given a 30 percent survival rate. Friends urged him to think positively, but, he says, "there was a big gap between my idea of hope and their ideas of hope. For me, hope was chemotherapy." He focused instead on the reality and set small goals, such as getting through the week alive and having minimal daily pain. When van der Weijden returned to competitive swimming, he set out to simply swim his best in small competitions but eventually went on to win a gold medal at the 2008 Olympics. When compared to cancer survivor and cyclist Lance Armstrong, he pushed back, saying, "Armstrong says that positive thinking and doing a lot of sports can save you. I don't agree. … I even think it's dangerous."

Does positive thinking work? Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* offered the vision that positive thinking can bring about positive realities and has been a jumping-off point for numerous self-help books. There has been some research supporting this thesis, but "if positive thinking is really such an easy recipe for success," ask Feldman and Kravetz, "why do so many businesses fail?"

The health belief model: The answer to the their question is held within what psychologists and public health researchers have dubbed "the health belief model," which addresses why people take risks. When people believe that a particular action will put them at risk of harm and the harm is severe enough, they won't take action. Alternatively, if they see the action as protecting them from harm, they will act. "People who pay attention to the positives at the expense of noticing the potential for negatives … may not take appropriate action to protect themselves," observe the authors. "Their lack of belief in their own susceptibility may be dangerous."

Research on health and positive thinking: While there has been some research linking positive thinking with surviving serious illness, a more complicated picture has emerged:

- **Flawed studies:** University of Pennsylvania psychologist James Coyne re-examined the evidence presented in previous studies of cancer patients and found that many of the studies were flawed—using small samples, lacking clearly specified hypotheses and employing inappropriate methods to analyze the data and interpret the results.
- **The danger of a simplistic view:** "To accept that positive thinking is critical to one's success," observe the authors, "you'd have to accept the unfortunate implication that people who aren't able to think as positively will tend to fail."
- **Interventions:** Studies have found that whether a cancer patient joins a support group, for example, does not affect the disease survival outcome, but it can provide emotional benefits such as improved mood and less anxiety.

Giving up some dreams, opening up to new ones: Carsten Wrosch and Gregory Miller argue in the journal Psychological Science that there are times when pursuing a goal may hurt more than it helps. "When people find themselves in situations in which they are unlikely to reach a goal, the most adaptive response may be to disengage from it. By withdrawing from a goal that is unattainable, a person can avoid repeated failure experiences and their consequences." Furthermore, giving up some goals frees people to pursue others they previously overlooked.

Grounded hope: Lock and van der Weijden, conclude Feldman and Kravetz, "embody something more pessimistic than positive thinking yet more realistic than pessimism. Perhaps we can call this … grounded hope, an approach to life involving building one's choices on a firm understanding of reality." Each started out with a goal that governed his life, and then trauma obstructed that path and set him on another. What makes both their stories of survival special is their ability to stop thinking positively and start thinking realistically, to avoid the comforting fiction that "everything will be fine," and instead bravely to ask "What now?"

chapter three:

the truth of illusion

At age 19, Casey Pieretti was hit by a drunk driver while pushing his broken down car towards home. His right leg was severed below the knee, and, he recalls, "I should have died." But Pieretti had lost his father and brother to an auto accident six years earlier and had a different perspective: "I wasn't dead, and I wasn't willing to waste time. I'd learned to live my life with my father and brother and then to live without them. It was the same with the leg. … The core person I was was the same, but what I'd do and choices I'd make had to be radically different." Fitted with an artificial limb, Pieretti eventually became one of Hollywood's most sought-after stuntmen. "I know I take life in my own hands every time I do a stunt," acknowledges Pieretti. "But I just knew I could do it and be the best at it." This belief in and willingness to take control of one's own life, even in the face of risk, observe Feldman and Kravetz, is a core characteristic of supersurvivors.

Personal control and positive illusion: The most powerful factor influencing people's perception of risk is their sense of personal control. "People [like Pieretti] who feel more in control of outcomes in their lives," write Feldman and Kravetz, "believe they're less at risk than those who feel less in control." Only the stereotype-driven belief that "this kind of event happens to a certain kind of person" (i.e., older or overweight) is a greater predictor of whether people will unrealistically underestimate their own risk.

Psychologists refer to the overestimation of personal control as "positive illusion." Unlike delusions, "positive illusions are people's 'mildly distorted positive perceptions of themselves (self-aggrandizement), an exaggerated sense of personal control, and

overly optimistic expectations about the future.'" Positive illusions and overconfidence can lead to taking risks. But is this bad?

- Studies of successful business executives have shown that while illusions of control expose people to the risk of failure, they also spur people to keep trying when they fail. Executive educator Marshall Goldsmith has found that "'if we have the illusion that we're great, we're open to trying more things. … Survivors and great entrepreneurs have this in common." This self-confidence is the "single strongest thread of commonality between mega-successful business executives," says Goldsmith.
- Supersurvivors have illusions of control that most likely influenced their accomplishments. Like Pieretti, write Feldman and Kravetz, "most supersurvivors believed that they had both the right and the personal capability to do what they'd done."
- While unrealistically positive thinking distorts a situation, having a strong belief in one's personal capabilities most likely helps people solve problems.

The formula for grounded hope: Grounded hope comes from combining a realistic view of the situation with a strong view of one's ability to confront one's destiny through effort. Although "the stories of supersurvivors vary dramatically from person to person," write Feldman and Kravetz, "we see time and again their sense of grounded hope. … The catalyst was a trauma, but an important part of the method for supersurviving is an unusual assessment of risk driven by an abiding belief that, through their own personal efforts, they control their own destinies."

chapter four:

the world we thought we knew

In 2003, platoon leader Paul Rieckhoff engaged in a firefight where his troops were ill-equipped. This experience—and numerous other similar combat operations—shook his faith in his mission in Iraq. Write Feldman and Kravetz: "Upon returning home … Paul began to question his most precious beliefs about duty, justice, and the values for which his country stood." Rieckhoff spoke out, expressing his disillusionment and went on to found the nonpartisan advocacy group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). Sometimes defending and sometimes countering American policy decisions, Rieckhoff was able to adapt his worldview and adjust his role from soldier to activist.

Compare his story with that of Cindy Sheehan, whose 24-year-old son Casey died in Iraq in 2004. Unlike Rieckhoff, Sheehan's worldview was shattered; she couldn't refashion her world after she lost her son and her trust in the government. Sheehan became a prominent peace and social justice activist, and in 2005 set up a camp near President George W. Bush's ranch in Texas, demanding an answer for what was happening in the country. Sheehan has been arrested at numerous anti-war rallies: "'I wasn't thinking so much in terms of good or bad anymore, just in terms of wrong or right,' she says … 'I would have thought before Casey died that it was bad to go to jail … Now it's my duty.'" She has been at the forefront of political activism and become a deep cynic.

In this chapter the authors "look beyond hope and to a certain kind of faith, the kind we experience every day in our lives." Trauma challenges that faith and can shatter it into pieces. How do people respond and reassemble it?

The assumptive worldview: In studying people's reactions to trauma, University of Massachusetts psychology professor Ronnie Janoff-Bulman suggests that:

- Most people start with basic assumptions: The world is good, good things happen to good people and they are good people.
- Despite what is shown in the media, most act as if these assumptions are true as they go about their daily activities.
- People assume bad things won't happen to them and are surprised when something unfortunate happens to someone they thought of as good.
- A corollary to this is victim-blaming: People assume that the victim of a crime must have done something to bring about it.

Accommodation: It is often not possible to push the "reset" button on a worldview, but many people do their best to "accommodate" or adapt to what has happened to them. Rieckhoff, whose IAVA activities initially labeled him a traitor, "hadn't abandoned his worldview, at least not wholesale. He still believed in the basic principles on which he saw his country as being based … and felt strongly committed to that country. His rebellious behavior … was an attempt to integrate them with the realities he had witnessed in Iraq."

Overaccommodation: Not everyone finds accommodation possible. Some worldview reconstructions "overaccommodate" to emerge maladaptive and extreme, with individuals now believing that "the world is an awful place," "no one can be trusted," and even "I'm a bad person." Upon losing her son, Sheehan stopped believing the world was a safe place and blamed herself for passing on a naïve worldview to him. She could no longer understand the world as she had before in any sense.

Regardless of how a person responds to this shattered worldview, Feldman and Kravetz conclude, "It's comforting to know that no matter where we fall in our thinking, we have the power to endure after surviving a catastrophic event."

chapter five:

the company we keep

In 2007, small business owner Amanda Wigal suffered a traumatic brain injury in a boating accident, slipped into a coma and was close to brain dead. Weeks later, she unexpectedly woke up. Although Wigal was unaware of it, she was surrounded by friends during the early days of her hospitalization who later drifted away. But she drew strong support throughout her ordeal from her fiancé and her mother, who also kept her struggling company afloat during her absence. Although the reality of Wigal's situation at many points was dire, Feldman and Kravetz note: "No matter how many people peeled away from Amanda's life, she believed that her mother and fiancé would always be there for her. This bolstered her perception that support would be available for as long as she needed it, a belief which kept her going." Her business also became vital to her recovery: "My company … went from being my livelihood to being my life."

The people in an individual's life really matter: Research into the social support that people receive, write Feldman and Kravetz, shows that it "may help people literally survive—an important prerequisite for being a supersurvivor."

- A 2005 study of hospice patients showed that "the rate at which patients who were visited by volunteers passed away was almost a third that of those who were not visited." They lived more than two-and-a-half months longer.
- In an earlier 1997 study, those individuals who received moderate to high levels of emotional support were about half as likely to have died than those who received lower levels of support.

The victim's perception of support matters: When a catastrophe hits, there's often an outpouring of help that diminishes over time. Even in situations where there is enormous financial support, after the earthquake in Haiti, for example, survivors still feel that nobody cares, as their need can be overwhelming and unfulfilled. A study of victims' responses after the devastating 1989 Hurricane Hugo revealed that the more severe the victims' losses and injuries were, the less support they perceived would be available to them in the future.

Researchers called this response the "perceived social support deterioration." Of this disconnect, note Feldman and Kravetz, "the victims' subjective perception that support was available strongly predicted their emotional well-being. So, even if people actually once received a lot of support, they might perceive that it is not now available or that it would not be in the future, and this perception is what really seems to matter in terms of victims' emotions."

Conclude Feldman and Kravetz: "Believing that someone is by your side—someone who makes you smile, but also someone you know you can count on when you need support—is one of the great secrets to supersurvival."

chapter six:

awakened by death

On September 11, 2001, people around the world watched the aftermath of the attacks on U.S. sites. Millionaire businessman Paul Watkins lost his friend David Charlebois, the first officer on American Airlines flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon. "Even though most people didn't know someone directly who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks," write Feldman and Kravetz, "many experienced trauma on a vicarious level." For Watkins, September 11 was a cataclysmic, life-changing event which led him to ponder the shortness of life and decide that he needed a more authentic path. Write the authors: "If he had been the one who died on September 11 instead of David, Paul wondered if he could honestly say he'd done everything he wanted to do in life."

Watkins had previously contemplated the priesthood and took religious vows before changing his mind and embarking on his entrepreneurial career. So after 9/11, he gave away his possessions, relocated to the St. Anthony of Padua Priory in New Orleans and joined the Dominican Order of priests. Write the authors: "He now sees this transformation as a kind of grace, one that allows him the opportunity to help others." The deaths of September 11 forced Watkins to look inside himself for answers: "I felt there was a part of me that I had ignored and hidden from all this time."

Confronting death: Death is a taboo subject and one that most people avoid discussing. They recognize that death is inevitable but have a strong desire to live and have developed unconscious defenses

to manage the terror of death, which social psychologists refer to as the "terror management theory."

- **The cultural worldview:** The concept of heaven, for example, allows Christians to extend people's lives beyond the here and now. Even in the more secular culture, people talk about the legacies they leave. Death anxiety is reduced by the promise of this pseudo-immortality.
- **Playing with death:** People create monsters, horror films and other vehicles to deal with death. In movies, for example, people can experience death but leave the theater alive. Note Feldman and Kravetz: "As long as we keep death an abstraction, we can go about confidently living our lives as though we have all the time in the world."
- **Financial success:** Wealth exerts a powerful draw upon people because it lets them feel special and entitled, but these assumptions are challenged when confronted by death.

Death reflections: Psychology researcher Philip Cozzolini acknowledges people's superficial awareness of death, but also posits that for terminal cancer patients and survivors of near-death experiences, "the subject of mortality has become a tangible, experiential fact of life that is systematically integrated into their thoughts and behaviors." This deeper encounter with one's mortality is called death reflection. Write the authors: "Life doesn't afford many opportunities to encounter the idea of death deeply. And when it does, these reflections are typically not pleasant—in fact they're often traumatic."

Watkins later worked on the rebuilding of New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He saw many supersurvivor traits within his neighborhood as it bounced forward after the disaster. "If you're going to reorient your personal values after a big tragedy like this, you're going to reorient your community's values," says Watkins. "The storm changed the city. There's more compassion among the people. … Today, people who never, ever considered coming to New Orleans are moving here, and the city welcomes them."

chapter seven:

faith's mixed blessing

In August 1930, 16-year-old James Cameron was peripherally involved in a robbery that resulted in the shooting and death of a white man in Marion, Indiana. A day later, an angry white mob rushed the jail where the boys were held, dragged them outside, and strung them up. His two companions died but Cameron, although badly beaten, survived the lynching because someone calmed the crowd down. He spent five years incarcerated for his part in the murder, where he was mentored by the local sheriff, became a devout Catholic and decided, say the authors, that "God had a mission for him: to turn his suffering, guilt and anger into … a way of making the world a better place." He later founded the first NAACP chapter in his city, helped force the desegregation of Milwaukee and founded America's Black Holocaust Museum. Throughout his life, Cameron's religious beliefs gave him the courage to confront the reality of racial prejudice and this, combined with his belief in his personal ability, gave him grounded hope.

Michael Bussee, however, had a different experience with religion. In his youth, Bussee recognized that he was homosexual but had been taught that his attractions were a sinful perversion. In 1976, he founded Exodus International, a nonprofit that sought to help people overcome their homosexual desires through a "reorientation" program. But in 1979 Bussee fell in love with a man, left the movement and went underground. His partner later died of AIDS, and "Michael's faith shifted away from one 'that only reinforces guilt and shame and depression." Bussee began leading survivor groups for people suffering from PTSD and depression after ex-gay therapy, and, note the authors, is "on the road to becoming free of self-hatred. His new mission is to help others along that same road."

Ask Feldman and Kravetz, "How does religion affect supersurvivors?"

Help :: The nun study: Epidemiologist and University of Kentucky neurologist David Snowdon followed 678 Catholic sisters for more than 25 years, collecting detailed data on their health, cognitive and physical functioning and genetics as they aged. Among the discoveries was that happier nuns lived longer. Snowdon highlighted two factors that could not be scientifically tested: "the first is the deep spirituality these women share" and "the power of community." Observe Feldman and Kravetz: "Something about religion can be beneficial to believers." Numerous studies have shown that the benefits of religion and a spiritual life also help lay people cope with stressors, as Cameron's story shows.

Writes psychologist Laura Brown: "Belief systems that separate the kindness of a divinity from experiences here on earth can be protective at times of trauma," and "beliefs that include a sense of personal connection with a nurturing, parental God can also be protective because many trauma survivors describe being comforted by prayer and the sense that God is listening to them even if their pain and suffering are not immediately relieved."

Hinder :: When religious beliefs haunt and disturb: While religion can comfort people, researchers have found that religious struggle can lead to compromised mental and physical health and, as Bussee's case demonstrates, trauma can cause some people to give up their faith. In one study of HIV-positive individuals, psychologist Gail Ironson found that people whose worldview perceived God as harsh, judgmental or punishing lost CD4 cells two-and-a-half times faster than those who didn't, with their viral load increasing more than three times faster. In another result, those who saw God as merciful, benevolent and forgiving lost CD4 cells five times slower, with their viral load increasing eight-and-a-half times slower than the other cohort. As Bussee stated, "that toxic faith—that bad things happen to you because you're being punished by God and good things happen to you because you're doing the right things … is just dangerous."

chapter six:

forgiving the unforgivable

Aaron Acharya grew up in Relukha, Bhutan, where his father was a respected village elder. While he was in college, however, his family was forcibly evicted because of their religious beliefs and relocated to a refugee camp in Nepal where they were deprived of living and food supplies. The injustices forced upon his family and others, Acharya felt, were unforgivable. One day, other refugees found the villager who had betrayed his father in Bhutan. When Acharya confronted the man, he learned a lesson in forgiveness: "We told him, 'We are angry. You are a horrible person.' And it was very strange because [he] admitted what he did. 'I made a horrible mistake. But look, they took away everything from me, too. … You can do what you want to me. Just make sure my wife and kids will be okay.'" Note Feldman and Kravetz: "At that moment, Aaron took his enemy's perspective and understood what had happened." Slowly the two families reconciled. Acharya had "recognized that to exact revenge would be to continue the cycle of voice, to stoke the fires of anger, and to victimize others." He eventually moved to the United States, founded a refugee organization and become an expert in human rights.

A continent away, 6-year-old Clemantine Wamariya experienced the mass killings in Rwanda and, believing her family had died, fled the genocide to a refugee camp in Burundi. After spending six years in seven refugee camps, she immigrated to the United States and later learned that their parents had survived the Rwandan holocaust. She went on to write an essay about her experience that won Oprah Winfrey's Holocaust Essay Contest and was finally reunited with her parents on the TV show. Forgiveness, said Wamariya, enabled her to

look forward and ask, "What now?" Sending her essay to Oprah was a step that said, "I would no longer be a victim. I wasn't going to take what life gave me." Since then she has attended Yale University, lectured on leadership and in 2011 was appointed a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

The universality of man-made trauma: According to Feldman and Kravetz: "trauma happens to somewhere between 50 and 80 percent of people in the developed world at some point in their lives." A significant portion of this group has other people to blame for that trauma, with approximately 45 percent of men and 43 percent of women having experienced events such as physical abuse, threats with a gun and rape. Interpersonal traumas, which occur between people with some acquaintanceship, are the most hurtful.

Unforgiveness and health: Grudge-holding and revenge-seeking have been shown to be bad for both mental and physical well-being. In one study, participants who imagined harboring unforgiveness against a person who had wronged them had stronger negative emotions, and higher heart rates and blood pressure than when they thought about forgiveness. In another study, people who reported holding grudges had higher rates of heart disease and cardiac arrest, arthritis, back problems and other ailments than those who didn't share this personality trait.

T**he power of forgiving:** Survivors and experts believe, write the authors, that "there should never be an obligation to forgive." There is research, however, that shows "that for people who naturally come to the point where they are ready to move beyond unforgiveness, to forgive is generally a healthy decision for them. It helps them to move forward in their lives, and indeed may help them become supersurvivors."

- In one study, people who tended to forgive others appeared to have a lower probability of depression. The researchers also suggested that hope may be the link between forgiveness and a lowered risk of depression.
- Psychologist C.R. Snyder created the Heartland Forgiveness Scale, a psychological test to measure forgiveness. In a 2005

study he reported strong correlations between this test, hope and depression. Said Snyder: "Forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past could be any different."

- Grounded hope is possible, say Feldman and Kravetz, when people break the psychological ties that bind them to the past and stop trying to change what has already happened.

Process models: Researchers believe that in order to forgive, victims must acknowledge the wrongdoing the suffering caused, admit that it may have changed their lives forever and own their feelings of sorrow, resentment and even rage. Furthermore, understanding why the perpetrators did what they did and gaining insight into their perspective, as Acharya did, also helps bring about forgiveness.

Desmond Tutu reflects on forgiveness: South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu gained prominence for his opposition to apartheid, his defense of human rights and his chairmanship of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which investigated all apartheid-related crime. Tutu's observations, scattered throughout the chapter, echo the authors' research on forgiveness:

- "No one has the right to tell someone who has suffered that he must forgive. No, we have to enter into the anguish of the one who has been made to suffer, to ameliorate and understand and sympathize with their suffering."
- "We can only hope that the sufferer will realize that not forgiving affects them as a human being, and hope that they will see that nursing a grudge is bad for their health—it can give one stomach ulcers."
- "To forgive is to abandon one's right to revenge. It is to give the other, the offender, the chance to make a new beginning. To forgive is to say, 'I refuse to be a victim.'"

"Virtually all psychologists also make this important distinction," write Feldman and Kravetz, "that forgetting is at best impossible and at worse unhealthy. Says Archbishop Tutu: 'Forgiving is not pretending you have not been wronged. This must be acknowledged.'"

chapter nine:

the right choice

Returning once again to the experiences of rock violinist Asha Mevlana, the authors note that her story reflects many of the principles that they have emphasized throughout the book. Mevlana's story doesn't end with her musical success, however. As she entered her mid-30s, she faced a choice: whether or not to have children. She had put off having children to focus on her career, but her situation was complicated by the fact that she could be at risk for ovarian cancer if she carried defective genes that would require her to have her ovaries removed before age 40. "We all face forks in the road," observe the authors, but Mevlana seemed "to feel an amplified sense of the gravity of loss" that accompanied each choice. When she finally took the gene test, she learned that this was one risk she didn't face and could postpone her childbearing decision even longer.

Contrast Mevlana's story with that of competitive marathon runner Iram Leon, whose passion took on new meaning after he learned he had a fatal tumor in his left temporal lobe. Following his diagnosis, he continued running but started pushing his young daughter in a stroller as he ran, taking the chance to spend quality time with her even though it meant giving up the opportunity to win in a race. Leon, write the authors, "was content with his choice to run with his daughter. … This meant leaving behind his chances of ever winning another race, but this sacrifice didn't torture him. He knew he couldn't have it all … and felt strongly that what he had was more than good enough." In March 2013, when Leon entered the Gusher Marathon in Beaumont, Texas, he never expected to win—after all he was pushing a stroller containing his daughter—but he did.

When supersurvivors face choices, note Feldman and Kravetz, those choices are often far weightier than what the general population encounters. Mevlana and Leon dealt with choice in very different ways, which both offer insight into the mind-set of supersurvivors.

The constant stream of choices: People are constantly making choices—from little ones, such as what to eat or wear in the morning to those that are potentially life-changing, such as whom to marry and where to live. People have abundant opportunities, but researchers have noted that choice can be a double-edged sword.

- Psychologist Barry Schwartz has noted that the overabundance of choices seems to have resulted in "an explosive growth in the number of people with depression. … Some estimates are that depression is 10 times more likely to affect someone now than at the turn of the century."
- Choice can be intimidating, and even terrifying when there is too much of it. Columbia University business professor Sheena Iyengar, author of *The Art of Choosing,* has reported in her studies that the choice dilemma becomes worse as the number of options open to people increases.
- Studies have shown that when people have a surplus of choices—whether it is to invest in one of several 401k plans or simply to buy a CD player—they may become paralyzed and unable to make a decision.
- In *The Paradox of Choice*, Schwartz categorizes people into two camps when it comes to making decisions: maximizers and satisficers.

Making the choice :: Maximizers: Like Mevlana, maximizers try to make the best choice possible and are constantly weighing information, which can result in a situation where the task is never done. As they objectively evaluate all the options, they may make the best choice possible but are often less satisfied with their choices and even feel regret about the alternatives they passed up. Mevlana, explain Feldman and Kravetz, "was objectively successful by anybody's standards. … But doubts and regrets about the options she had left behind tortured her. Like any good maximizer, she wanted to have it all."

Making the choice :: Satisficers: Leon, however was a satisficer. He gathered sufficient information to make a good enough choice; when he found an option that met his needs, he stopped and made the decision. Running with his daughter meant he would probably never win a marathon, but he recognized that time with her was more important. As his story demonstrates, satisficers tend to be more content with their choices—even if the decision they reached may ultimately not be as good as the one a maximizer might have made.

Playing the cards we've been dealt: Feldman and Kravetz write: "The supersurvivors we've interviewed … see themselves as doing what anyone else would have done in their situations: making the best choices possible given what life has thrown at them." Whether satisficers or maximizers, "to them it was their choices that helped them to rise up after trauma and claim the future they wanted for themselves."

The authors conclude: "We all must make choices—sometimes difficult, sometimes easy—based on what life puts in front of us. But we know how to survive these trials, and how to thrive despite them—or perhaps because of them. It's part of who we are. Life is worth embracing in part because of our ability to transform suffering into triumph and setbacks into successes. Supersurvival isn't a magic bullet that makes everything instantly better. It's not something we do that solves all our problems forever. In a way, life is a constant process of supersurvival, of facing life's seemingly impossible choices with honesty and faith in ourselves. It's a capacity all of us share. It's the capacity to hope."

Summary by Lois Gilman

Lois Gilman has written for a variety of magazines, including Corporate Board Member, Money and TIME. She has worked on the program development of numerous business conferences, including the Fortune Global Forum and the Wall Street Journal CEO Council. Gilman was a head researcher at Time Life Books; a senior reporter at TIME Magazine; a program research manager at Fortune conferences; and the Web files editor of Business 2.0 magazine. She is also the author of *The Adoption Resource Book* and *The New York Parents' Book*.

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