

# How to Find Strength During a Crisis

With Oren Jay Sofer

Teaching meditation online these last few weeks, I've spoken with health care workers without enough protective equipment, breaking down in tears from the stress. I'm in touch with people who have been laid off, and with others torn up inside from having had to lay off employees. I've spoken with those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19.

And I'm speaking with those who are at home (like me), doing all we can to make the best of a tense and difficult situation—friends having panic attacks, parents struggling to keep it together for their kids, spouses snapping at each other and fighting over things that ordinarily wouldn't bother them.

Several days a week my own partner commutes to the hospital where she works as a Palliative Care Chaplain. I kiss her goodbye in the morning and tell her I love her, feeling worried for her safety and wishing she could stay here and work from home with me.

There is Chinese proverb from Chuang Tzu's writings that I have always loved: It is when the snow and ice are upon them that we see the strength of the cypress and pines.

If you've ever walked through a pine forest in the winter, you'll understand the power of this quote. It's kind of a marvel to see their branches, full of dark green leaves, sometimes bending under the weight of feet of snow and ice.

## Discovering Our Resources

In times like these, when each difficult wave of news comes before we've even had a chance to catch our breath and recover from the last, it can start to feel like we're starting to buckle under the weight of all that snow and ice.

In other words, now is the time to discover and draw on our inner and outer resources to be here for each other. So, what are some of those resources?

Our world is rich with resilience, if we know how to look and listen. It starts with the small things—waking up in the morning and opening your eyes. You can see. You can hear. Breathing in and breathing out, sitting up in bed, the body has enough health to greet the day.

If you begin to look more closely, you will find that there are outer resources around you all the time: from the small joys and pleasures of life, to the presence of a loved one, the touch of the wind or the sound of the birds. After all, the unfathomable generosity of this planet, despite everything, is a resource.

And then there is the often overlooked, untapped well of our inner resources.

## Drawing on Inner Resources

Awareness is a resource. Compassion is a resource. Kindness and generosity and patience are resources. Our ancestors and lineage and faith are resources. When we begin to recognize the good qualities in our own hearts and mind, and the potential for their growth, we begin to sense the strength

of those dark green, flexible boughs of the cypress and pines.

Meditation practice is another inner resource. It teaches us how to recognize and enhance the positive qualities in our own minds. And, as our understanding grows, it can help curtail the fear, limit the amount of time and energy we spend fighting and resisting the truth of what's happening, and bring a wiser perspective so that we can be here for ourselves and those around us.

Things are hard right now for us; there's no way around that. There is no simple "look on the bright side" to make the situation more palatable.

But there is an opportunity to bring forth the goodness in our hearts, to share that with each other, and to allow ourselves to be nourished by it. Perhaps surprisingly, that starts with finding some tenderness for yourself, right here and now, just where you are.

We might believe that our personal pain doesn't matter in light of all the suffering in the world. We might have been taught that it's selfish to attend to our own emotions, or even feel ashamed of having needs at all.

Yet we can't really be there for others if we're not here for ourselves. So, I invite you to take just a moment, to pause.

Can you turn your attention inward with a kind, gentle gaze? Can you feel one in-breath? Can you feel your feet on the ground as you breathe out? With everything that's happening, it's easy to forget how important it can be to slow down and make space to be with how you're feeling right here and now. If you can learn to be gentle, forgiving, and caring toward yourself, then you can extend those qualities to others in your life, and to those in the world who are suffering.