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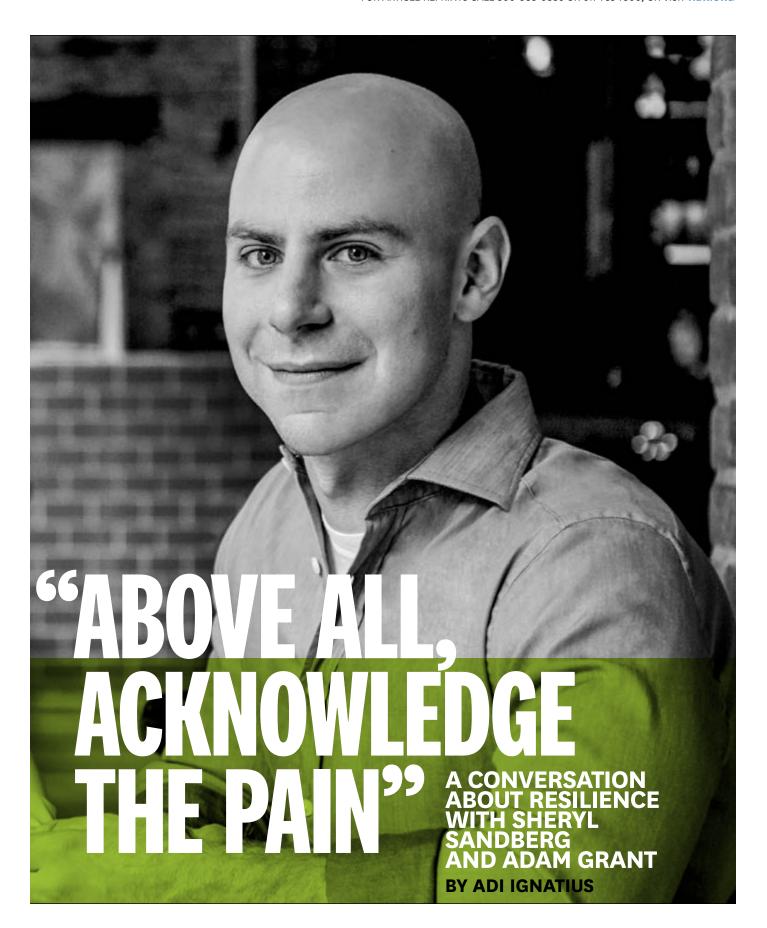
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## ARTICLE MANAGING YOURSELF "Above All, Acknowledge the Pain"

An Interview with Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant by Adi Ignatius



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Sheryl Sandberg's life seemed ideal—she had a great job, an influential book, a loving family. But then, in the spring of 2015, her husband, Dave Goldberg, was felled by a cardiac condition while the couple was vacationing in Mexico. Sandberg suddenly had a new, unwanted identity: grieving widow.

After struggling to recover her footing at home and at work, she began to write about her pain. She authored a long essay about her suffering and sense of isolation and posted it on Facebook, where she serves as chief operating officer (and has nearly 2 million followers). The piece set off a global conversation about how people can cope with tragedy.

As Sandberg worked to get back on track, she reached out to her friend Adam Grant, a Wharton professor and author, to learn what research tells us about resilience. That led to a collaboration on the newly published book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy.* Sandberg and Grant recently sat down with HBR at Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, California. In this edited conversation, they explore what it takes to build resilience in yourself, your team, and your organization.

#### HBR: Why did you decide to write about the pain of losing your husband?

SHERYL SANDBERG: Losing Dave is the hardest thing I've ever been through. Early on, I felt I wasn't going to survive the minutes, the days, the weeks, the months. I felt people were looking at me like a ghost—afraid to say anything. As the days turned to weeks, I felt increasingly isolated. So as the end of Sheloshim [in Judaism, the 30-day period of mourning for a spouse] approached, I started writing a Facebook post about it all. I wasn't sure I was going to share it, but I decided it could not make things worse and just might make them better, so I hit "post."

#### Were you satisfied with the response?

SANDBERG: It was very helpful, because my friends and colleagues finally felt they could start talking about the elephant in the room. One told me that she had driven by my house almost every day but was afraid to come in. After my post, she came in. Others said they had been afraid to ask me about what I was going through, and they started asking. In addition to my friends' responses, I was blown away by the responses of so many people. A man who had lost his wife right before their third anniversary talked about honoring her life by trying to help women in his male-dominated field succeed. Friends and strangers posted support for one another. I think it was these responses that eventually led to writing the book.

#### What's the origin of the title Option B?

SANDBERG: It came about when I was looking for someone to cover a father-son activity. My friend Phil came up with a plan, and I said, "But I want Dave." Phil said, "Option A is not available. Let's kick the shit out of Option B."

#### How did you bring Adam into this?

**SANDBERG:** Adam is a friend and a great psychologist and researcher. I asked him early on what I could do to help my kids get through this—my biggest fear was that they would never be happy again. As we worked together, we learned that resilience is not something we have a fixed amount of but something we can build—in ourselves, in our children, in our organizations, in our communities. *Option B* is our attempt to share what we learned.

#### Having exposed your feelings and vulnerability, are you now a different kind of leader?

SANDBERG: When I came back to work, I was so overwhelmed with grief that I could barely get through a day or even a meeting. When people said, "Well, of course you can't really contribute—look at all you're going through," my self-confidence crumbled even further. It helped when people—and this was especially true of [Facebook CEO] Mark Zuckerberg—would tell me after a meeting that I hadn't made a fool of myself or even that I had made a good point. So now I try to take that extra step of noticing and helping rebuild the confidence of colleagues who are facing adversity. When you suffer a tragedy, the secondary loss of having it bleed into other areas of your life is so real. It's important for all our companies to give everyone the time off they need to grieve and heal. And once people come back to work, it's important to help them realize that they can still contribute and not to write them off because they're sick or grieving.

## Would you advise people coping with a difficult personal situation to reengage with their work life as quickly as possible?

SANDBERG: Absolutely not. There's no one way to grieve, and there's no one path. The timing for one person is not the timing for another. In the book we share the story of a woman who went back to work the day after her husband died and felt judged by her colleagues. But she just couldn't bear to be home, and she needed somewhere else to go. Other people may need months or longer. Everyone has to find their own path. The same is true of how much sharing you want to do. I ended up sharing much more openly than I would have expected, to break through the isolation. But some people don't want to share. We have to respect everyone's timing and feelings.

#### WHEN A COLLEAGUE SUFFERS A LOSS

#### How should companies respond when employees are coping with a personal crisis?

ADAM GRANT: Research shows that companies with assistance programs that provide financial support or time off in a crisis—when an employee's house is destroyed by a tornado, or when he or she has to care for somebody who is very ill—actually see dividends. People feel they belong to a more caring company. They take pride in their company as a "human" place to work and are more committed to it. There's a real case to be made for organizations to step up.

## People often don't know what to say in the face of a colleague's tragedy—so they say nothing, or they say the wrong thing. What's your advice?

SANDBERG: Above all, acknowledge the pain—acknowledge that there is a ginormous elephant sitting in the room. Before I lost Dave, I would tell colleagues who had been diagnosed with cancer or who had lost a spouse that I was sorry, but I wouldn't bring it up again—to avoid "reminding" them. Losing Dave made me realize how absurd that is. You could not remind me that I had lost Dave; I remembered that. Acknowledging it—"Hey, I know this is a brutal time for you and your kids; how are you?"—makes such a big difference. The people who say "You're going to get through this" are kind. But it's way kinder to say "We're going to get through this."

#### How helpful is it when people ask if there's anything they can do?

**SANDBERG:** It's a nice offer, but it puts the burden on the person suffering to ask for help and to think about what might help. When you are overwhelmed with sadness, what do you ask for? Dan Levy works with me

# "RESILIENCE IS NOT SOMETHING WE HAVE A FIXED AMOUNT OF BUT SOMETHING WE CAN BUILD."

at Facebook, and his son became very ill and, tragically, passed away. When Dan was in the hospital, a friend texted him: "What do you not want on a burger?" Not "Do you need anything?" Doing something specific is incredibly helpful.

#### "POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH"

#### Did you have any fears about writing this book or how it might be received?

sandberg: I don't think anyone can share so openly without feeling nervous. But I'm looking for some meaning—any meaning—to come from the tragedy of Dave's death. Dave was an incredibly giving person. At the funeral, our friend Zander Lurie, who's now the CEO of SurveyMonkey—the company Dave was running—asked how many people had had their lives changed by something Dave did for them. A sea of hands went up. So in the spirit of Dave's life, I hope to help people by sharing my experience, by sharing the research Adam and I uncovered, and by sharing incredible stories of other people who have overcome adversity.

#### Adam, what's your hope in getting these ideas out there?

**GRANT:** Neither of us is an expert on grief. I study motivation and meaning. Sheryl is speaking from her personal experience. This is about so much more than grief. It's about the adversity we all face and the hardships people can run into. How do you find the strength to overcome them—or sometimes just to persevere?

Resilience means snapping back to where you had previously been. But you also write about "post-traumatic growth." What's the idea behind that?

GRANT: A pair of psychologists, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, put this on the map. They were working with parents who had lost a child. Parents said that in addition to the tremendous pain they felt, they experienced some positive changes in their lives. A whole community of researchers then tried to figure out what it means to grow from trauma. Many people eventually felt stronger. They said, "I got through this; I can get through anything." Some people found gratitude for what they still had. Some formed deeper relationships than they'd experienced before. And some felt a new sense of meaning and purpose—they wanted to make something of their lives.

#### Sheryl, is this familiar? Have you experienced any of these things?

SANDBERG: Gratitude, for sure. Early on, Adam said to me that things could be a lot worse. I said, "Are you kidding? How could things be worse?" And Adam said, "Dave could have had that cardiac arrhythmia while driving your children." Hearing that, I felt better—appreciative that my kids are healthy and happy and alive. It's counterintuitive that one can recover from tragedy by thinking about even worse tragedy, but it helps us feel grateful for what is still good in our lives. No one would want to grow this way. I would absolutely trade it all in to have Dave back. But when trauma happens, we can grow from it.

#### Is it possible to develop in these ways without first experiencing catastrophe?

**GRANT:** This is one of the really interesting things about working together—the juxtaposition of social science and Sheryl's lived experiences. Sheryl responded to all this by saying, If we have posttraumatic growth, why don't we have pretraumatic growth? And I was like, pre-what? But this is a great concept; people shouldn't have to experience horrible events to learn some of these lessons.

#### Have you seen examples of pretraumatic growth?

SANDBERG: After Dave died, my friend Katie Mitic was inspired to start writing long letters to her friends on their birthdays telling them why she loved and appreciated them. Some of her friends started doing the same. That's a good way to deepen relationships and find meaning and gratitude—before any trauma. I think we build resilience to prepare for whatever adversity we'll face. And we all face some adversity—we're all living some form of Option B.

#### **BUILDING RESILIENCE**

#### Is there a tool kit for developing resilience?

**GRANT:** At work, the most powerful thing is learning from failure. We all fail; we all make mistakes. It can

be incredibly difficult to face them, but that's the only way we can build resilience. I learned this when I was in grad school. I was terrified of public speaking, but I had to do it to be a teacher. So I tried to get feedback. I volunteered to give guest lectures for other people's classes, and afterward I gave out feedback forms. Reading them was unpleasant (one said I was so nervous I was causing the students to physically shake in their seats), but I learned what my systematic mistakes were, and I was able to set goals to try to improve. It would be great to bring that kind of openness to our jobs—to encourage others to critique us and help us improve.

#### Everyone talks about learning from failure, but a lot of companies don't do it very well. Why is that?

GRANT: I think the simple answer is ego. We all know that failure can make us better if we treat it as a learning opportunity. But I don't know anyone who says they want to screw up as badly as they can just to learn. So when we fail, it tends to catch us off guard. And then we get in a mode of trying to defend our ego and our image, to prove to ourselves and others that we're not stupid. That stands in the way of improving and making progress.

#### How can we learn to handle failure more constructively?

**GRANT:** When I work with executives, I ask them to score not only their performance in a given episode but also how well they take feedback afterward. It's amazing how open they become to feedback, especially the overachievers—they really want to get an A!

#### How do you design an organization that fails well?

GRANT: The first thing is to create a culture where people can talk openly about their failures and mistakes. Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School has studied hospitals to figure out how they can prevent major medical errors. She found that teams learned more and could avoid problems if they had a sense of psychological safety—if they could take risks and be open about mistakes, if they weren't going to be punished for honest errors.

#### Facebook famously encourages employees to take the kinds of risks that can result in failure. How have you built that sensibility into the culture?

SANDBERG: One way is by learning from other organizations. One year the Facebook management team traveled to the Marine Corps training facility at Quantico, Virginia. We did some hard exercises. And we saw that after each exercise, the Marines do a full debrief on everything that went wrong. In the past, I would have thought an approach like that was just piling on.

But we learned that if you do these debriefs and build them into the culture, you become an organization that keeps learning.

#### Resilient companies also adapt effectively to changing circumstances. What's the key to that?

GRANT: Resilience is about the speed and strength of your response to adversity. The best thing you can do is build routines that might be applicable in an unexpected situation. SpaceX is an interesting example. CEO Elon Musk told us that because the rockets had failed over and over again, he asked people for a list of the 10 biggest launch risks. (It turned out that one explosion was caused by the 11th risk, so maybe the lesson is to ask for the top 11.) High-reliability organizations know how to set these routines in place. They make exhaustive lists of things that could go wrong, they precheck them, and then every time they have an unexpected failure, they expand the list.

#### Does Facebook consciously prepare itself for unexpected crises?

SANDBERG: Mark often says that companies fail in two ways—by not hitting their plan, and by hitting a plan that isn't ambitious enough. He never wants us to fail the second way, because then you've basically failed before you start. You need the discipline of setting really ambitious goals, making it safe for people to debrief and own failure and get feedback, and being willing to learn and correct.

## HBR has run articles showing that you can cultivate personal resilience by taking some downtime, via scheduled or unscheduled breaks, or by cutting yourself off from technology.

GRANT: A lot of evidence speaks to that. But I think we tend to define breaks too narrowly. Kim Elsbach of UC Davis has done research showing that one of the best ways to give people a break is to assign them mindless work. Rote tasks can free up your mind to think creatively. As people advance and develop more-complicated skills, we make the mistake of taking repetitive tasks off their plates. Switching between challenging, creative problems and, say, entering data into a spreadsheet for a few minutes can help us recharge.

### It's often said that a sense of humor is vital to resilience. How do you access humor in the darkest moments?

**SANDBERG:** I think humor is huge. Nell Scovell, who edited our book, is a TV comedy writer with four siblings. At her mother's funeral, she stood up with an envelope and said, "I have in this envelope the name of Mom's favorite child." In those really dark moments, being able to laugh, even for a second—even about the event

itself—is a huge stress release. It makes you feel, "Oh my God, it'll be OK."

## You write about how to build resilience in kids, in part by helping them understand their strengths. Is this a model for helping employees as well?

GRANT: I think so, with the caveat that parenting is way harder than leadership. One of the drivers of resilience in kids is "mattering"—the belief that other people notice you, care about you, rely on you. When kids feel they don't matter, the consequences can be devastating: delinquent and antisocial behavior, aggression. Along those lines, it is every leader's responsibility to make every single employee know that they matter, to show that they're noticed. That's one of the reasons management by walking around is so popular. You also want to make employees feel relied on. Many leaders are afraid to ask for help, but people want to know that their contributions have an impact. One of the most powerful things a leader can do is say, "I don't know the answer here."

#### **DEALING WITH MASS GRIEF**

## The U.S. election produced grieflike symptoms in maybe half the population. How should a company deal with something like that?

GRANT: I can speak to this from a university perspective. It was all over the map—some people were elated, others were depressed, a few didn't know what to think or feel. There has been a lot of debate about how open our universities and workplaces should be to talking about politics. I believe strongly in the importance of making it safe to have intellectual exchanges—that's what a university is for. In class I said, "We're going to talk about the dynamics of the election and how it will affect leadership." Several conservative students said they had been made to feel it wasn't acceptable to be a Republican on an Ivy League campus. That's not OK, just as it's not OK to unfriend somebody with different political views. What matters is, How does this person treat you? And what do they stand for in their daily actions?

## Sheryl, your previous book, Lean In, was a best seller, but some criticized it, saying that your life is different from most people's and that therefore the message wasn't broadly relevant. Are you anticipating what the critics will say this time?

**SANDBERG:** I know how fortunate I am, not in Dave's death but in so many other aspects of my life. I have a great job, a great boss, resources very few people have. I understand that adversity and hardship are not evenly distributed. *Option B* draws not just on my story but on the research and stories of many people overcoming all kinds of adversity. No one should have to go through challenges and trauma alone.

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