

# Surrender TO YOUR Adversity

How to Conquer Adversity,  
Build Resilience, and Move  
Toward Your Life's Purpose

**ROB SWYMER**

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# introduction

## A Letter to the Reader

*Hard times don't create heroes. It is in the hard time  
that the "hero" within us is revealed.*

—Bob Riley

How ironic that I decided to write a book about overcoming adversity while I am again overcoming adversity. As I sit here in London working on this book, we are facing unprecedented times, one year into a pandemic that shut down the entire world. No matter your political or scientific views, we are all in this together, learning as we go.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic impact have negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance-abuse disorders. During the pandemic, about four in ten adults in the United States reported symptoms of anxiety or depression.<sup>1</sup> Yet another study, from July 2020, found that many adults are reporting specific negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kff.org>.

(36 percent) or eating (32 percent), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12 percent), and worsening chronic conditions (12 percent) due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 63 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, with 25 percent reporting increased substance use to deal with that stress and 25 percent saying they'd seriously considered suicide. Eighty-one thousand and three: that's the number of people who died from drug overdoses in the twelve-month period ending in June 2020. It was a 20 percent increase and the highest number of fatal overdoses ever recorded in the United States in a single year.<sup>3</sup>

In an online survey carried out by New York University, alcohol and drug use among young people is reportedly increasing as youth resort to substances as a coping mechanism. Lead researcher Ariadna Capasso says the pandemic could be triggering an epidemic of substance abuse. These findings seem to be supported by a broad study carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and

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<sup>2</sup> Alkhouri, Dana, "Pandemic's Mental Health Burden Heaviest Among Young Adults," February 21, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/pandemics-mental-health-burden-heaviest-young-adults/story?id=75811308>.

<sup>3</sup> Bensaid, Adam, "Covid-19 has Triggered a Silent Pandemic of Depression and Anxiety," February 15, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/covid-19-has-triggered-a-silent-pandemic-of-depression-and-anxiety-44191>.

Prevention, which analyzed more than 180 million emergency room visits from December 30, 2018, to October 10, 2020, reporting that 2020 saw 45 percent more drug overdoses.<sup>4</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about mental health and substance use have grown, including concerns about suicidal ideation. In January 2021, 41 percent of adults reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder, an estimate that has been largely stable since spring 2020. In a survey from June 2020, 13 percent of adults reported new or increased substance use due to coronavirus-related stress, and 11 percent of adults reported thoughts of suicide in the past thirty days. Suicide rates have long been on the rise and may worsen due to the pandemic. Early 2020 data shows drug overdose deaths were particularly pronounced from March to May 2020, coinciding with the start of pandemic-related lockdowns.<sup>5</sup>

I could write an entire book on these disturbing trends in mental health. What started out as a physical health crisis with high death rates has now led to long-lasting mental health effects. My fear is that, as you read this book, these numbers have increased significantly. Now, more than ever, we need tools that will help us overcome adversity and thrive when all this passes, and it will.

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<sup>4</sup> Bensaid, Adam, "Covid-19 has Triggered a Silent Pandemic of Depression and Anxiety," February 15, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/covid-19-has-triggered-a-silent-pandemic-of-depression-and-anxiety-44191>.

<sup>5</sup> Panchal, Nirmita. Kamal, Rabah. Cox, Cynthia. Garfield, Rachel, "The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use," February 10, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use>.

I wanted to tell my story of adversity so that maybe someone would connect to it, learn from it, and use the tools I have used to overcome. My story is a very real and true experience, one that many of you might well relate to. I am a guy who happened to have his share of adversity. What sets me apart is that I dug deep to find ways to rise and discover a new purpose in life, no matter how bad things got. That's where the real work is done.

Sometimes it is a comfort to hear from another person who went through and is still going through adversity. It can be especially impactful when it is an ordinary person who suffered and overcame, not a famous athlete or celebrity. It can be hard to relate to the stories of the rich and famous. I wanted to write a book that was based on my ordinary life. I am a survivor of addiction and can tell you firsthand that, at my lowest, it wasn't the celebrity spokesperson or the wealthy businessman who helped me. It was the addict who had the sobriety and the tools I needed to learn who made the difference.

I needed to fully immerse myself in the program and develop a new vision for myself and how I wanted to live without alcohol. It took a lot of work, but it was all worth it. What I soon realized is that we are all on a level playing field when in the grips of addiction. No amount of money or fame matter at that point. You listen to those who have gone through it and walked in your shoes. Recovered addicts are the ones who will get you through it. They are the only ones who can help, because they get it. They get you.

My hope is that you take something from this book and apply it to your life. Maybe just a little of what I went through can help you thrive again. Remember that everyone has a story, and all types and forms of adversity matter. The key is to recognize that even small setbacks

can be building blocks to put in the adversity bank for later, when you really need it. Looking back, I realize the many times I was able to save up resilience to help in future struggles.

Whether you are going through adversity now or are concerned about someone in your family who is, you can use the tools in this book to help. If you are a parent, these tools can help you enable your child to build up their resilience muscle to use later in life. Ultimately, this will give them the independence they need and the ability to overcome adversity, which will make them stronger as adults.

I ask you to read this with an open heart and see if you can relate, not only to my story but to the many I have included here. I have highlighted everyday people who went through adversity, overcame it, and built their resilience muscle. Some of those I feature went on to become life coaches, authors, firefighters, mothers, fathers, and, in my eyes, superheroes. My dream is that this book will be your roadmap to finding your inner superhero.

# chapter 1

## The Night Everything Changed

*Love is a fabric which never fades, no matter how often it is washed in the water of adversity and grief.*

—Robert Fulghum

**I**t was a warm Monday afternoon in July. Bonnie had a few friends over. In the hot Atlanta weather, they were all cooling off with a dip in the pool. Our pool was always busy, filled with friends and family members having fun and hiding from the summer heat. While our friends were at play, I was in my home office working, as usual. I could hear the music cutting through the air and an exchange of jokes, the normal sounds of everyone having fun. I could also, of course, hear the boisterous laughter of my wife, Bonnie. Her laugh was endearing and brought a smile to my face. I looked forward to joining the group soon, right after my workday wrapped.

Bonnie, always attentive, would regularly come into

my office throughout the day to check on me, usually in her bikini, and with a huge smile on her face. She never left without giving me a soft kiss and even occasionally offered a little flash on the way back to the pool. She was always so playful with me, so sexy. Bonnie was a showstopper. When she entered a room, everyone stopped what they were doing and paid close attention to her every move. You could not take your eyes off her. She was mesmerizing, a force of nature to both men and women.

After I completed my work for the day, I put on my swimsuit and headed out to the pool to relax and join in on the fun. By then, it was just Bonnie and another couple hanging out around the pool. We were all in the hot tub, planning dinner for that night and discussing our weekend plans. Our house was the place to be, and the party never seemed to stop. The front door was always open, and our friends and family knew they were welcome. They took full advantage of this open invitation, regularly stopping by for a drink or a quick dip in the pool. Bonnie was her happiest when she had people around her. I often said that if it was your first time at the Swymers', you'd feel like family by the time you hit the kitchen and got your welcome hug from Bonnie.

Things progressed as usual at the pool, from beer and wine to cosmopolitan cocktails—one of Bonnie's favorite drinks. At that point in my life, my recovery program was strong, and I could be around people consuming alcohol without any effect on me at all. Not everyone in recovery can do this, but I remain grateful that I could still enjoy my friends and be around a party atmosphere without craving alcohol. The only way this could have happened is through a strong sobriety program and constant resolve.

It was getting late; the setting sun appeared to be a beautiful, bright-red and orange ball in the sky. As I relaxed in the hot tub, I was so grateful for the life Bonnie and I had built together. We worked so hard to get where we were, and we never took it for granted. We always shared our happiness with everyone around us, as that was important to Bonnie.

I still remember the moment it happened, just before seven o'clock. We were all enjoying the hot tub, talking and laughing with one another. I looked over my shoulder to see Bonnie had leaned over the waterfall and was looking into the pool. I thought nothing of it at first, figuring she was splashing some cold water on her face to cool down. But after a short time, I went over to check on her. When I turned her around, I knew something was terribly wrong. She was unresponsive, her eyes closed with little color in her face. I shook her, tapping her face to try and wake her up. I was yelling her name at the top of my lungs, though she was mere inches away from me. I prayed she would wake up, but my cries were met with no response.

Meanwhile, our friend frantically called 911. I kept yelling, "Wake up, wake up." It all seemed like a blur, like everything was moving in slow motion. It was an out of body experience. I sat there, in the hot tub, holding her, still helplessly trying to wake her up. It seemed like my efforts lasted forever.

As you can imagine, I was quickly running out of patience. I had our friend hold Bonnie while I ran out to the front yard to flag down the ambulance. What was taking them so long? I kept running back and forth from the front yard to the pool, inquiring if there was any response from Bonnie. There was nothing. In extreme

despair, I could still smell the faint scent of the jasmine she had planted around the pool. Although subtle, the smell ripped through the air as my heightened senses took it all in.

When the ambulance finally showed up, I watched from a distance as the paramedics worked on her by the pool. It seemed to take forever, but they eventually stabilized her enough so they could transport her to the hospital. The ride to the hospital felt long. I kept asking the driver to go faster, confused and still in my out-of-body-experience state. From the front seat of the ambulance, I looked back through the window and saw the paramedics using paddles to revive Bonnie. That image will be etched in my mind until the day I die. I felt hopeless watching a piece of my heart struggle for every breath. I wish that feeling on no one.

It was total chaos when we arrived at the hospital. I ran to the back of the ambulance to tell her I loved her, that I would always be there for her. I wanted to reassure her that I was by her side. Her eyes were still closed, and she showed no response. The paramedics rushed Bonnie into the trauma room, and I followed along until they left me behind in the waiting room.

I sat in total shock, unable to believe this was happening to me, to our family, to my beloved Bonnie. In that cold and weathered waiting room, I rocked in the hard and uncomfortable chair while reciting the Serenity Prayer, repeatedly: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” That prayer had saved my life on many previous occasions. In that moment, it was the only thing I could think of to calm my nerves. I recited the prayer over and

over again, nervously rocking from side to side and hoping this would soon pass.

Bonnie and I met over thirty-three years before that fateful evening. We had our ups and downs, like any other couple, but we always came out of it stronger, together. We were just about to enter our next chapter as empty nesters; our three children were away at school or on their own. Just days before, we were talking about all the places we wanted to see. In fact, we were planning an upcoming trip to Italy, which was just a few weeks away. We had recently welcomed our first grandchild into the world, and it seemed as if life couldn't get any better. But life clearly had other plans. I couldn't imagine, could not even contemplate, how or why this occurred. As I prayed, I had faith that this was just another test, another life event that would create more resilience. I trusted it wouldn't be an event that left me a broken man.

I was finally able to see Bonnie in the trauma room. As I entered, I expected to see my Bonnie smiling back at me, reassuring me all would be fine, just like she always did when life threw us a curve ball. But that wasn't the case. Instead, as I turned the corner, I noticed tubes, machines, and lots of nurses around her. I quickly realized Bonnie was on life support with a tube in her head, blood draining right out of it. I was confused. *What is going on here?* The nurses saw I had entered the room and immediately tried to calm me down. The doctor eventually came in to tell me Bonnie had suffered a massive brain aneurysm while in the hot tub.

I remained by her side from that moment on. I never left her. The staff worked on her all night, trying different procedures and medicine—anything that might bring her back. By now, word had gotten out to all our

friends and neighbors. They flooded the waiting room to cling onto any news they could get. It was just like back at our family pool, everyone stopping by and surrounding us with love. I sent for my children: Nicole in Savannah; Eric in Los Angeles; and Wes in DC. I called Bonnie's mom in Florida and my brother-in-law on Cape Cod to let them know they needed to get to the hospital as quickly as possible.

At one point, I decided to take a quick walk around the ICU. It was then that I noticed that our friends and family remained in the waiting room. They refused to leave. They wanted to be close to Bonnie. The entire waiting room was packed with friends and neighbors. All that love and support was overwhelming. One of my good friends owned a restaurant, and he brought food in for everyone. In true Bonnie fashion, we took over the waiting room.

My kids eventually arrived, along with Bonnie's mom and my brother-in law. By Tuesday, it was becoming clear that our Bonnie was not going to come back; the damage was just too severe. I had Wes, my youngest, update the waiting room while I called extended family to let them know the tragic news. These proved to be some of the most difficult conversations I would ever have in my life. But I had no choice. Repeatedly, I heard disbelief and tears on the other end of the line. I wanted to be the one to call; I wanted them to hear my voice. I needed them to know I was going to be all right and that I was strong and would be there for my kids.

So many came to say good-bye to Bonnie that the staff had to organize and direct the steady flow. So much love yet so much sadness filled these visitors. I will never forget how my middle boy, Eric, sat by his mother's bedside for

three days straight, holding her hand and sobbing from the pain of losing his mother. It was tough realizing that my daughter, who had just welcomed her first little one, would have to face being a mom by herself without Bonnie's guidance, love, and support. I thought about the fact that Wes, my youngest child who was only twenty years old at the time, would live a great part of his life without his mother. As a dad, nothing hurts more than seeing your kids suffer yet having no ability to take that suffering away.

It is crazy what goes through your mind as you experience something like this. Bonnie and I were together since we were nineteen. We grew up together. She was the glue of our family, the center of everyone's universe. We had been through so much together, so many ups and downs. I had no idea what was next for me, but I knew God had a plan. In my life, no matter what I faced, I faced it with faith, not fear.

Despite the pain and suffering, I decided in that moment to be a model for my children, my family, and my friends. I wanted to send the message that we were all going to be all right. At that point in my life, I had twenty years of sobriety. My journey to sobriety helped me understand you must hand your fate over to God and accept his plan for you. If I didn't believe in that, I would have left this life a long time ago. I made the decision that I would find our new normal. But as I made that decision, I wasn't sure how it would be possible. I would have to find a new purpose and a new perspective. Only through surrender could I find a way to move forward.

I remember walking through those hospital hallways. Room after room was filled with people clinging on to dear life. I saw family after family standing in the hallway

in tears, wondering how they would recover from their pain. Each represented a different story, a special journey, a remarkable loss.

Through my experience with losing a loved one far too soon, I realized we all experience adversity. How you choose to deal with it, however, is your choice. Looking back at my life, I see that I had to make a conscious decision to move forward, learn from the experience, and come out of it with a higher purpose. You will hear me say many times that I believe “life is happening *for* me, not *to* me.” In even my darkest hours, this motto has saved me every time.

We made the decision to take Bonnie off life support on July 31, 2013, three days after she suffered that massive brain aneurysm. I laid there next to her, my hand on her chest as she took her last breaths. I felt as her chest rose a little lower each time, slower and slower until there was no more. I studied her face, her lips, her hair, her cheeks; everything about her was like it had been the first time I saw her on our blind date back in college. Knowing this would be the last time, I needed to remember every detail. In the end, I just didn’t want to leave her side. My brother-in-law, who I love with all my heart, was by my side the entire time. The hardest thing I had to do was walk out of that room knowing I would never see her in this lifetime again. It was surreal.

Grief can be very unpredictable. A year after Bonnie’s passing, I was getting ready to sell our family home. I had to clean out her art studio. Among all the other talents she had, Bonnie was an accomplished artist. As I was going through the studio, I found myself on my knees sobbing, overcome by emotion. Most days, I was in a great place and did a good job of moving forward and going on with

life, but these moments reminded me that grief can come and go without any warning. For all those dealing with loss, turn to your faith and know there is a bigger plan that we don't get to control. I am thankful to have so much love around me every day. There is life and love after loss, but that doesn't mean you forget. You don't move on from the person you lose, you move on with that person in your heart forever.

This is not a book about grief so much as it is about what I have experienced in my journey through life so far. I have learned that you don't come into this life with resilience. Rather, it is a muscle you must strengthen. We learn resilience along the way and build up the ability to deal with hardship as we navigate each one. My dad used to say, "Adversity builds character." As a kid, I wasn't sure what he meant. As I sat in the hospital with Bonnie, holding her hand as she took her last breath, that quote rang in my ear. I knew I needed to show character and be strong. I believe that there is nothing I cannot handle if I apply the simple principle of surrendering and moving forward with new purpose and perspective. The adversity I faced in my life as a young child and throughout my adult years created a strong sense of resilience, an ability to cope with life on life's terms. Every challenge in my life had gotten me ready for the moment I told Bonnie good-bye.

My hope is that somewhere between the lines of my story you can take a bit of what I learned and apply it to your life, your challenges, and your ability to live life on life's terms. No matter how big or small the adversity you experience, you can overcome it and thrive again if you learn from it. I acknowledge I am just a guy who went through his share of shit, survived it, came out the other side, and is now thriving more than ever. I have gone from

having nothing, bouncing checks to pay for diapers in my younger years, to living my life with the financial freedom I always dreamed of. I like to joke with my kids that it took me sixty years to become an overnight success. It is indeed a lifelong journey.

Ask yourself, what is next for you in this life? I get asked that all the time. My answer is always the same: "I am not really sure, but I know that the universe will bring it to me when I am ready, and I am so excited to see what it is." After all, what could possibly beat me after losing Bonnie?

Here is what I know with 100 percent conviction: Everyone has a story, and every story has some sort of adversity or challenge. The difference is that some people bounce back, continue to move forward, and continue to thrive. Others fall victim to the challenge and can never fully recover. Why do some succeed while some fall short? What is the quality shared by those who succeed? We never stop moving, learning, growing, and loving. We accept the bigger plan and trust the journey. In the end, the difference is that we surrender to move forward.

I met Bart in my late twenties. We worked for a small company together, located outside of Boston. The two of us had an instant connection, becoming very close to one another. As I navigated my career as a sales leader in the software industry, I would always ask Bart to be a part of my team. We worked together at several companies throughout the years. I trusted him with my life, and we worked very well together. Bart was an adrenaline junkie. A Marine sniper in his younger years, when he wasn't selling software, he was heli-skiing or racing cars.

One year, when Bonnie couldn't attend one of my sales incentive trips, I took Bart. We were inseparable. We had genuine love for each other. Every time we spoke or saw

one another, our parting words were “I love you, man.” I remember when I told Bart that I was in AA and that I was going to be okay. We were having dinner together and he reached across the table and touched my face with his hand. He looked into my eyes and let me know he was there for me and that he had my back. It was hard to leave him behind when I moved to Atlanta with the family, but we stayed close even when we weren’t in the same city for work.

Not too long after we moved to Atlanta, I received a call from his fiancée that changed my life forever. She told me that Bart, his dad, and several other friends were returning from a hunting trip in Canada when their charter plane went down. Bart and the others instantly died. The voice on the other line simply said, “He is gone.”

This was the first big loss I had in my life. It rocked me. I took the next flight to Boston to be with friends and family. Bart was Jewish, so we took turns spending time with his body at the funeral home until we were able to bury him. The Jewish tradition of shiva requires a week of mourning, and I stayed in Boston the entire time. Time seemed to stand still and there was an unmeasurable amount of grief, a feeling I had not experienced before. I had lost my best friend, my brother from another mother. Although he has now been gone for twenty-five years, I still find myself thinking of him and all the memories that we had together. I still look to the heavens and talk to him and ask for support when I need it. I know he is up there with Bonnie, helping to watch over me and my family.

Everything happens for a reason. I believe that this event ultimately helped prepare me for other loss in my life, like when I lost my father, my mom, and eventually

my wife. We are never really ready for loss, and it affects us in different ways depending on who and where you are in life. Loss is a part of life and a part of living. Know that there is a grand plan and that all will be okay. It has taken me a lifetime to get to this place so don't be too hard on yourself. Be open to feeling the emotions and be grateful for the moments you have with loved ones. We don't have the control of when they leave us, but we can control how present we are for them when they are here.

The reality is that it is a top-down solution that starts with your mindset. If you can change your mindset from the top, then the rest of your soul and your life will follow. Superheroes understand that, and so can you. They have all faced adversity and dealt with loss or grief, yet superheroes thrive and keep moving forward with a winner's mentality and mindset. They all find new purpose in life and use that purpose to move on and thrive again. They are obsessed with that purpose and make it their life mission. I call this the "superhero mindset," and I believe it is one of my best tips for facing adversity. When life presents heartache, I summon my superpowers and set my mind to overcome. The good news is that we all can become superheroes and thrive. Once you decide you are going to do it, it all comes down to taking action.

My story not only defines the superhero mindset but also outlines in detail the steps you can take to build resilience muscles and thrive after any negative life event. It does not matter the size of the experience or event. This all applies to you. The truth is each experience has varying degrees of impact, but each presents an opportunity to build resilience. The key is to use every life event to get stronger for the next. Life will continue to disappoint and surprise you. You have to be ready to

## SURRENDER TO YOUR ADVERSITY

handle what comes your way and to bounce back quicker and stronger each time.

What if our ability to surrender is the key to building resilience and your superhero mindset?

What if giving in is the most important step you can take to move past your challenges?

I ask you to take this journey with me, and you can decide.



## about the author



A Boston native, Rob has faced adversity throughout his life and learned how to come out of each experience with a higher purpose and new perspective. As a seasoned sales executive of over forty years, Rob leads his teams with empathy and applies the lessons learned from his adversity to help others build resilience and thrive, not only in business but in their personal lives as well.

Rob currently lives in London with his wife, Missy, and enjoys spending time with this blended family of five children and three grandchildren.