



# The Adversity Hack

Get Out of Your Own Way,  
Shift Your Thinking, and  
Change Your World

MEG POAG

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# Chapter 1

## Meet the Adversity Cycle: Moving out of Ego and into Joy

I'm writing this book to give you a very clear guide using an incredibly effective tool that will empower you to live a more joyful life. I've coached hundreds of clients in using this tool. I've seen the incredible changes they've made in their lives, and I want that for you. And the great news is, you don't need me! You don't need a coach. (Though it does arguably help make the learning process clearer, easier, and faster.) You just need to learn how to use the tools in this guide to become your own coach. Walking the path of the Adversity Cycle will lead to some *big* "aha" moments and help you change your approach to life, allowing you to bring more joy into your life by going to battle with your own thoughts and beliefs that aren't working for you. The essence of this work is that it helps you move out of ego-based, survivalist thinking and into an approach to life that shows you what you need to learn and do to have more joy and fulfillment.

Let's dive a little deeper into what I'm talking about here before we start learning how to use the Adversity Cycle. What I'm essentially talking about is going to battle with your ego.

*Ego* is a word with various meanings. Understanding your ego, as defined next, will be key to waking up and maximizing the effectiveness of this tool.

## Ego 101

In my very basic definition, ego is the armor that guards the beliefs, pathways, and patterns we have built up to protect ourselves, survive, and feel better. It's essentially the part of our personality we have built in response to stressful, hurtful, traumatic, or other negative experiences throughout our lives. We've had bad stuff happen to us, felt threatened or afraid or hurt, and we've created a response that moved us out of that perceived danger or pain. That response is what gets built into our ego armor. It's all the stuff we think and do to make ourselves feel OK, feel better, and feel comfortable so we can avoid pain and suffering in the moment. It's not a bad thing. The ego is necessary.

In fact, from all the research I've done, it sounds to me like it's actually impossible to fully shed your ego. Yet the path of enlightenment seeks to do just that—shed the beliefs that are not true and don't serve us. However, from what I've read, all people have been able to do is be able to separate themselves from their ego, observe it when it pops up, and not act according to its will. But it's still there. So, let's just figure out how to identify it, navigate around it, and eventually stick it in the backseat of the car of life, blindfolded and gagged. Sound good?

So, how do you know when your ego is driving? And how can you identify when a thought you're having is an ego-driven thought and not necessarily something you need to believe and act on? When we are in automatic thinking mode, the ego governs how we see the world and how we react and respond to challenges. On the face of it, this armor protects us from trauma, catastrophe, or unpleasant experiences. Our ego is triggered by our amygdala, a portion of our brain that enables us to feel emotions and respond quickly to negative emotion, including fear and the changes it can cause in our bodies. The amygdala is a powerful database. It signals when we're fearful or when we feel threatened, hungry, or when we encounter other stressors. It also tells us what to do, based on what's worked for us to get out of a similar negative situation in the past.

## Preparing for Battle

Our ego wants us to stay comfortable and feel better, telling us that we're OK where we are, that perhaps we don't need to change, that if something adverse happens, we should just try to speed it up, get over it, or extricate ourselves from it. The ego becomes a protective device—a lover, of sorts, of what we consider the status quo. We can't lose our ego. It's part of us. The tricky thing is that we allow our ego to operate like other parts of our autonomous or automatic systems, such as breathing.

The ego helps us survive. However, engaging in challenges—what I call Key Moments—is antithetical to what our egos want us to do. So I'm encouraging you—actually, I'm downright urging you—to take on your ego as you start to use the Adversity Cycle.

At first you'll experience confusion, and you may even struggle to challenge the messages that your ego has conveyed. I'm asking you to lower your defenses and go with me on this. Ask yourself why you would ever want to subject yourself to such unpleasantness.

These patterns, ingrained in our egos, were created in response to past traumas or a survival mode default. It's almost like we're enjoying our misery. The ego wants us to feel like we're in control, like we're right and others just don't get us. Frankly, it becomes easier to let our ego drive while we merely muddle through the issue at hand, without questioning the automatic beliefs and actions our ego is feeding us. Examples of automatic, ingrained beliefs include, “If someone points out something negative about me, they are a jerk,” or “When conflict around me gets heated, it's best to just shut up and get out of it,” or “This huge failure of my team at work is a result of others' incompetence, so I should just do everything myself.”

Even if you're not completely satisfied with a certain response or reaction, it's simply easier to respond automatically, the same way you've done before. When this happens, know that this is your ego protecting you from veering off these deeply etched pathways.

Taking on your ego may be a bit frightening, but you'll be OK. I promise. The Adversity Cycle will help you take on beliefs that you've accepted as virtually necessary to survive and be OK. Think of it as the

mental scaffolding that is holding up your entire foundation. What you want to do is collapse that foundation, because its structure is limiting your ability to grow, become much more aware, and experience more joy. Working on building this new foundation can take many years. However, the Adversity Cycle can help you reduce that time down to a year.

But before we start working with the Adversity Cycle, I want you to look at two lists. The first is a list of joyless survival emotions, based on your self-focused, automatic ego. When you read the words in this list, you may realize that you really identify with them and feel some of them quite frequently. The second list includes the joy-inducing emotions that can lead to better engagement with yourself and with others around you. The emotions in this list are an indicator that you are *not* coming from a place of ego, which we will later describe as your “higher self.” While you’re reading through these lists, let yourself feel these emotions. Think about recent situations that have caused you to experience the emotions in the first and second lists.

You’ve probably noticed that these are two very different lists. The first list is survival-based, whereas the second list is creation-based. When you operate from the first list, you are in survival mode, which is your ego’s response to fear or threats. When you live in fear, your ego is constantly being triggered. The ego has a purpose and provides you with a path to feeling better in the short term, but it will not offer you long-term solutions and fulfillment. Allowing your ego to control your outlook, and even your beliefs, is terrible for your body, your brain, and your life.

When you are operating from the second list, however, you are in learning and creation mode, which opens you up to new experiences and growth. Creation mode allows you to rewire your brain and shift your entire inner world. The last decade of study in neuroscience has shown us that we can literally rewire our freaking brains to not go down the path of stress and survival, so we can more easily access the neuropathways of creation and move toward growth and joy in life!

An awesome bonus to being in learning and creation mode is that your brain works WAY better; your IQ and EQ go up because you are using the higher, rational, analytical parts of your brain more. And instead of releasing toxic chemicals in your body, you actually release

chemicals that promote health and well-being—just by thinking rationally, creatively, and with curiosity as opposed to self-protection, stress, and anger.

**Survival Emotions  
(Self-Focused)**

- DOUBT
- FEAR
- ANGER
- INSECURITY
- WORRY
- ANXIETY
- JUDGEMENT
- COMPETITION
- HOSTILITY
- SADNESS
- GUILT
- SHAME
- DEPRESSION

**Creation/Learning Emotions  
(Selfless)**

- GRATITUDE
- LOVE
- JOY
- INSPIRATION
- PEACE
- EXHILARATION
- WHOLENESS
- TRUST
- PRESENCE
- EMPOWERMENT

Ultimately, the path you choose is up to you. But know this: There are only two paths, one of survival and one of creation. And the Adversity Cycle is your tool to guide you along the path of creation.

This commitment to choose the path of learning and creation and use your Key Moments takes a heck of a lot of courage. In essence, when you do this, you are forcing yourself not to do all the stuff that has made you feel OK for your entire life. You are going to bat against a very powerful part of your brain and psyche, and some might argue, your basic human wiring. I'm not going to lie and say it's a breeze.



In her book *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown illustrates this commitment concisely and powerfully when she suggests that we all choose courage over resentment. Resentment and regret are sure signs that we've been ignoring what our Key Moments are telling us. Those are matrix-based emotions. It takes courage to embrace these learning moments and allow them to take us to the truth. That is, the truth about who we are and how to live in a way that brings us joy.

This quote from Theodore Roosevelt underscores why taking on our ego is such a valiant effort:

*It is not the critic who counts. Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming . . .*

To do the work of the Adversity Cycle, you must live according to the wisdom that you acquire through your Key Moments. Living this way takes discipline and firm boundaries. If you are experiencing resentment, know that it's because you've been busy trying to please others and not doing the harder work to know yourself. Instead, discover and embrace what you need to live a joyful life and commit to living true to that knowledge all day, every day, as much as possible. This work requires that you get good at saying no so you can live according to what's most important to you. *This* is what your Key Moments are trying to show you, each time they surface. And it's time to stop ignoring them.

I have a small example of this ego battle from my own experience as a leader. During my time leading a nonprofit organization, some people who worked with me joked that I didn't seem to possess any emotions. They pointed out that I didn't get upset, and I didn't raise my voice when I felt something was going awry. They said I was almost robotic, especially in times of stress.

One day, one of my team members told me that he finally figured me out! He said that whenever I got mad, I'd ask the colleague whom I

was frustrated with to “help me to understand.” He was right. I would ask them this to help me to understand why they took that approach or what led to the decision they made. By modeling this behavior, I kept my composure and kept my ego-based thoughts to myself. By inviting this particular colleague to provide more context for his actions (which I may have thought were inadequate or misdirected), I was able to achieve amazing results! I received incredible feedback from him. Instead of shutting him down with a yelling fit or simply muddling through (like our egos would prefer, to avoid conflict and keep order), he helped me to fully understand his thought processes, the information he was using to guide his decisions, and what support he thought he needed and didn’t receive.

By inviting my colleague to help me understand his point of view, I was able to see things in a different light. And rather than feeling threatened, I allowed myself to become curious about this new approach. By engaging in open dialogue, we guided each other toward the right process for our company, and we both grew. He became more productive, we became much more aligned in how I could support his success, and I became a much better leader.

This led to a powerful, transformative Key Moment for me in my progression as a leader and as a person. But it really did take me battling away my ego throughout difficult conversations and situations to be able to have the presence to stay curious and sit with the discomfort. It’s more than worth it, but it’s sometimes really difficult. However, I can promise you, it gets easier and easier. It’s a skill, just like any other skill. And the more you practice, the better you get.

## How the Adversity Cycle Addresses Resistance and Confusion

Resistance comes to all of us in different forms. And you will face resistance (mostly within yourself) every step of the way as you practice with this tool. After coaching countless people on how to use the Adversity Cycle, I’ve identified a couple of strategies to help you know if you are on track and how you can stay on track.

The first strategy we call Lanterns to help you shed light on the complexity when you get bogged down, lose energy, or become confused. Lanterns help you see more clearly so you can navigate through the unique forms of resistance that come up in each step.

This is a journey, and there will certainly be many opportunities that will surface that could take you right off course. The Lanterns presented in each step are attributes you can apply to the work so you can speed through it gracefully with clarity and ease. You can meditate on each Lantern or use them as affirmations as you are pondering the questions of each step. If you decide to approach each step with the Lantern attributes for that step, you will be led on a clearer path and be confident that your work is on track!

The second component of the Adversity Cycle that is set up to support your progress and avoid derailment is what we call the Off-paths. These are the most common and fundamental thought or behavior pathways that alert you to the fact that you have *not* really done the full work of that step.

When you have wandered off the path, you should reexamine your Key Moment or adversity through the questions in that step again until you can come out of that work—and for the most part, not see the Key Moment or adversity in a way that shows you are still thinking the types of thoughts that are on the Off-paths.

I've heard just about every argument you can imagine whenever my clients (and I!) are faced with the challenges this tool brings. If you let these resistances, thoughts, and opinions derail you, they absolutely will. This tool is meant to throw you into a battle with your ego, and you currently subconsciously think that everything your ego tells you is not only true but is also keeping you safe, secure, and feeling OK.

Use the Lanterns and Off-paths as your guide: Are you resisting the work or getting off course? If so, it's time to step around those thoughts that are creeping up and recommit to the path that works: the path of transformation.

## Your Lanterns of Discernment and Intention

In working with my clients, I've found that moving along the Adversity Cycle is a lot like walking a narrow path through the darkness. Sometimes you realize you're not really on the path, but you don't know how you got off the path or how to get back on it. As you commit to walking this path, the Lanterns can help light the way, and lead you back to where you need to be.

The Lanterns are there for you to use to keep you clear and successful in using the tool. The two main Lanterns I invite you to pick up when you feel yourself drifting from your commitment to do this work are discernment and intention.

**Discernment Lanterns** will turn on the logical part of your mind to help you learn what the universe is trying to teach you. When this Lantern shines, you will discern the facts and plan a path forward that will create a positive outcome.

**Intention Lanterns** will help you remember to keep yourself conscious about what is happening moment by moment in your life, so you can see the opportunities for growth and start to catch the bullshit, ego-based thoughts so they don't take over. For most of us—and for about 90 percent of our waking hours—our minds want to be in automatic thinking mode, not logical/active thinking mode. In this default mode, our subconscious is driving and telling us to do all the same stuff we've always done, which hasn't worked for us in the long term, and to believe everything that has been programmed into us that has held us back. This is a huge barrier to progression. If you want to progress on this path, you must commit to being intentional in your engagement with the world around you.

As you experiment with the steps in the tool, you must have an intention to engage your mind and use good discernment, or you will miss it all! It's so crazy, but I see it over and over, and there is actually good science proving that we don't really engage cognitively in most of our lives, most of the time. Brain scans show that most of our brain activity is *not* in the frontal lobe, where we use logic. So we're essentially walking zombies, not analyzing what's happening at any degree of functionality. When this happens, we're coasting on the subconscious.

Believe it or not, we actually have to set an intention to use the logical part of our brain. Awareness and discernment are not our brain's natural state of operation in daily life. A helpful analogy would be to compare your subconscious to your autonomic nervous system. Your subconscious drives your thoughts, just like your autonomic nervous system drives some of your bodily functions (breathing, fight-or-flight response, coughing, etc.). You can intervene with your somatic nervous system, which offers you voluntary control over your breathing. It's similar with your subconscious and conscious, or intentional, thought. You can turn on your conscious thinking to override the automatic, or subconscious, thinking, putting it in check and not automatically accepting the thoughts and opinions it gives you.

## Working with the Lanterns

I want you to arm yourself and prepare for battle. I've given you the context you need to start to understand what you'll be up against and the gift of two Lanterns that have worked for me and my clients as we have navigated this often ambiguous and confusing path. I also have a fun little challenge for you! Start to build your muscles now by using these two Lanterns over the next few days.

Each morning, decide you are going to embody discernment and intention in the way you are navigating your daily activities, including the micro-decisions and observations you have throughout the day. Use the Lantern of discernment to ask critical questions about the thoughts that surface. For example, do they represent the path of survival or the path of learning and creation? And I'd like you to use the Lantern of intention to stay alert and aware, so you can *pause* before making any automatic decisions about what is happening around you and choose the path of learning and creation, especially when things don't go your way.