

“Follow these precepts and you will revolutionize your life. Read this book!”

—Steven Pressfield, author of *The War of Art* and *Gates of Fire*

# THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY



**RYAN HOLIDAY**

Bestselling author of *Trust Me, I'm Lying*

## PRAISE FOR *THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY*

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“Ryan brings philosophy out from the classroom and thrusts it back where it belongs, in our daily lives, helping anyone approaching any problem address it with equanimity and poise. A kind of user’s manual for life, you will turn to it time and time again and learn to tear through any obstacle and resolve any conflict. An absolute must-read.”

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“Beautifully crafted. Anyone who wants to be better should read this.”

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“Inspired by Marcus Aurelius and concepts of Stoicism, Ryan Holiday has written a brilliant and engaging book, well beyond his years, teaching us how to deal with life’s adversities and to turn negatives into positives. It is invaluable.”

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“Ryan Holiday teaches us how to summon our best selves. Most of us spend our lives dodging the hard stuff. Holiday exposes the tragic fallacy of this approach to living and offers us instead the philosophy of the Stoics, whose timeless lessons lead us out of fear, difficulty, and paralysis to triumph.”

— SHARON LEBELL, author of *The Art of Living*

THE  
OBSTACLE  
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WAY

THE TIMELESS ART OF  
TURING TRIALS INTO TRIUMPH

*Ryan Holiday*

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# CONTENTS

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[\*Praise for The Obstacle Is the Way\*](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

## [PART I: PERCEPTION](#)

[THE DISCIPLINE OF PERCEPTION](#)

[RECOGNIZE YOUR POWER](#)

[STEADY YOUR NERVES](#)

[CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS](#)

[PRACTICE OBJECTIVITY](#)

[ALTER YOUR PERSPECTIVE](#)

[IS IT UP TO YOU?](#)

[LIVE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT](#)

[THINK DIFFERENTLY](#)

[FINDING THE OPPORTUNITY](#)

[PREPARE TO ACT](#)

## [PART II: ACTION](#)

[THE DISCIPLINE OF ACTION](#)

[GET MOVING](#)

[PRACTICE PERSISTENCE](#)

[ITERATE](#)

[FOLLOW THE PROCESS](#)

[DO YOUR JOB, DO IT RIGHT](#)

[WHAT'S RIGHT IS WHAT WORKS](#)

[IN PRAISE OF THE FLANK ATTACK](#)

[USE OBSTACLES AGAINST THEMSELVES](#)

[CHANNEL YOUR ENERGY](#)

[SEIZE THE OFFENSIVE](#)

[PREPARE FOR NONE OF IT TO WORK](#)

## [PART III: WILL](#)

[THE DISCIPLINE OF THE WILL](#)  
[BUILD YOUR INNER CITADEL](#)  
[ANTICIPATION \(THINKING NEGATIVELY\)](#)  
[THE ART OF ACQUIESCENCE](#)  
[LOVE EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS: AMOR FATI](#)  
[PERSEVERANCE](#)  
[SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF](#)  
[MEDITATE ON YOUR MORTALITY](#)  
[PREPARE TO START AGAIN](#)

[\*Final Thoughts: The Obstacle Becomes the Way\*](#)  
[\*Postscript: You're Now A Philosopher. Congratulations\*](#)  
[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)  
[\*Selected Bibliography\*](#)  
[\*The Stoic Reading List\*](#)  
[\*Reading Recommendations\*](#)



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## PREFACE

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In the year 170, at night in his tent on the front lines of the war in Germania, Marcus Aurelius, the emperor of the Roman Empire, sat down to write. Or perhaps it was before dawn at the palace in Rome. Or he stole a few seconds to himself during the games, ignoring the carnage on the floor of the Colosseum below. The exact location is not important. What matters is that this man, known today as the last of the Five Good Emperors, sat down to write.

Not to an audience or for publication but to himself, *for himself*. And what he wrote is undoubtedly one of history's most effective formulas for overcoming every negative situation we may encounter in life. A formula for thriving not just in spite of whatever happens but *because of it*.

At that moment, he wrote only a paragraph. Only a little of it was original. Almost every thought could, in some form or another, be found in the writings of his mentors and idols. But in a scant eighty-five words Marcus Aurelius so clearly defined and articulated a timeless idea that he eclipses the great names of those who came before him: Chrysippus, Zeno, Cleanthes, Ariston, Apollonius, Junius Rusticus, Epictetus, Seneca, Musonius Rufus.

It is more than enough for us.

*Our actions may be impeded . . . but there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions. Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting.*

And then he concluded with powerful words destined for maxim.

*The impediment to action advances action.  
What stands in the way becomes the way.*

In Marcus's words is the secret to an art known as *turning obstacles upside down*. To act with "a reverse clause," so there is always a way out or another route to get to where you need to go. So that setbacks or problems are always expected and never permanent. Making certain that what impedes us can empower us.

Coming from this particular man, these were not idle words. In his own reign of some nineteen years, he would experience nearly constant war, a horrific plague, possible infidelity, an attempt at the throne by one of his closest allies, repeated and arduous travel across the empire—from Asia Minor to Syria, Egypt, Greece, and Austria—a rapidly depleting treasury, an incompetent and greedy stepbrother as co-emperor, and on and on and on.

And from what we know, he truly saw each and every one of these obstacles as an opportunity to practice some virtue: patience, courage, humility, resourcefulness, reason, justice, and creativity. The power he held never seemed to go to his head—neither did the stress or burden. He rarely rose to excess or anger, and never to hatred or bitterness. As Matthew Arnold, the essayist, remarked in 1863, in Marcus we find a man who held the highest and most powerful station in the world—and the universal verdict of the people around him was that he proved himself worthy of it.

It turns out that the wisdom of that short passage from Marcus Aurelius can be found in others as well, men and women who followed it like he did. In fact, it is a remarkable constant down through the ages.

One can trace the thread from those days in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire to the creative outpouring of the Renaissance to the breakthroughs of the Enlightenment. It's seen starkly in the pioneer spirit of the American West, the perseverance of the Union cause during the Civil War, and in the bustle of the Industrial Revolution. It appeared again in the bravery of the leaders of the civil rights movement and stood tall in the prison camps of Vietnam. And today it surges in the DNA of the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley.

This philosophic approach is the driving force of self-made men and the succor to those in positions with great responsibility or great trouble. On the battlefield or in the boardroom, across oceans and many centuries, members of every group, gender, class, cause, and business have had to confront obstacles and struggle to overcome them—learning to turn those obstacles upside down.

That struggle is the one constant in all of their lives. Knowingly or not, each individual was a part of an ancient tradition, employing it to navigate the timeless terrain of opportunities and difficulties, trial and triumph.

We are the rightful heirs to this tradition. It's our birthright. Whatever we face, we have a choice: Will we be blocked by obstacles, or will we advance through and over them?

We might not be emperors, but the world is still constantly testing us. It asks: Are you worthy? Can you get past the things that inevitably fall in your way? Will you stand up and show us what you're made of?

Plenty of people have answered this question in the affirmative. And a rarer breed still has shown that they not only have what it takes, but they thrive and rally at every such challenge. That the challenge makes them better than if they'd never faced the adversity at all.

Now it's your turn to see if you're one of them, if you'll join their company.

This book will show you the way.

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## INTRODUCTION

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**T**his thing in front of you. This issue. This obstacle—this frustrating, unfortunate, problematic, unexpected problem preventing you from doing what you want to do. That thing you dread or secretly hope will never happen. What if it wasn't so bad?

What if embedded inside it or inherent in it were certain benefits—benefits only for you? What would you do? What do you think most people would do?

Probably what they've always done, and what you are doing right now: nothing.

Let's be honest: Most of us are paralyzed. Whatever our individual goals, most of us sit frozen before the many obstacles that lie ahead of us.

We wish it weren't true, but it is.

What blocks us is clear. Systemic: decaying institutions, rising unemployment, skyrocketing costs of education, and technological disruption. Individual: too short, too old, too scared, too poor, too stressed, no access, no backers, no confidence. How skilled we are at cataloging what holds us back!

Every obstacle is unique to each of us. But the responses they elicit are the same: Fear. Frustration. Confusion. Helplessness. Depression. Anger.

You know what you want to do but it feels like some invisible enemy has you boxed in, holding you down with pillows. You try to get somewhere, but something invariably blocks the path, following and thwarting each move you make. You have just enough freedom to feel like you can move; just enough to feel like it's your fault when you can't seem to follow through or build momentum.

We're dissatisfied with our jobs, our relationships, our place in the world. We're trying to get somewhere, but something stands in the way.

So we do nothing.

We blame our bosses, the economy, our politicians, other people, or we write ourselves off as failures or our goals as impossible. When really only one thing is at fault: our attitude and approach.

There have been countless lessons (and books) about achieving success, but no one ever taught us how to overcome failure, how to think about obstacles, how

to treat and triumph over them, and so we are stuck. Beset on all sides, many of us are disoriented, reactive, and torn. We have no idea what to do.

On the other hand, not everyone is paralyzed. We watch in awe as some seem to turn those very obstacles, which stymie us, into launching pads for themselves. How do they do that? What's the secret?

Even more perplexing, earlier generations faced worse problems with fewer safety nets and fewer tools. They dealt with the same obstacles we have today *plus* the ones they worked so hard to try to eliminate for their children and others. And yet . . . we're still stuck.

What do these figures have that we lack? What are we missing? It's simple: a method and a framework for understanding, appreciating, and acting upon the obstacles life throws at us.

John D. Rockefeller had it—for him it was cool headedness and self-discipline. Demosthenes, the great Athenian orator, had it—for him it was a relentless drive to improve himself through action and practice. Abraham Lincoln had it—for him it was humility, endurance, and compassionate will.

There are other names you'll see again and again in this book: Ulysses S. Grant. Thomas Edison. Margaret Thatcher. Samuel Zemurray. Amelia Earhart. Erwin Rommel. Dwight D. Eisenhower. Richard Wright. Jack Johnson. Theodore Roosevelt. Steve Jobs. James Stockdale. Laura Ingalls Wilder. Barack Obama.

Some of these men and women faced unimaginable horrors, from imprisonment to debilitating illnesses, in addition to day-to-day frustrations that were no different from ours. They dealt with the same rivalries, political headwinds, drama, resistance, conservatism, breakups, stresses, and economic calamities. Or worse.

Subjected to those pressures, these individuals were transformed. They were transformed along the lines that Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel, outlined when he described what happens to businesses in tumultuous times: "Bad companies are destroyed by crisis. Good companies survive them. Great companies are improved by them."

Great individuals, like great companies, find a way to transform weakness into strength. It's a rather amazing and even touching feat. They took what should have held them back—what in fact might be holding you back right this very second—and used it to move forward.

As it turns out, this is one thing all great men and women of history have in common. Like oxygen to a fire, obstacles became fuel for the blaze that was their ambition. Nothing could stop them, they were (and continue to be) impossible to discourage or contain. Every impediment only served to make the inferno within them burn with greater ferocity.

These were people who flipped their obstacles upside down. Who lived the words of Marcus Aurelius and followed a group which Cicero called the only "real philosophers"—the ancient Stoics—even if they'd never read them.\* They had the ability to see obstacles for what they were, the ingenuity to tackle them, and the will to endure a world mostly beyond their comprehension and control.

Let's be honest. Most of the time we don't find ourselves in horrible situations we must simply endure. Rather, we face some minor disadvantage or get stuck with some less-than-favorable conditions. Or we're trying to do something really hard and find ourselves outmatched, overstretched, or out of ideas. Well, the same logic applies. Turn it around. Find some benefit. Use it as fuel.

It's simple. Simple but, of course, not easy.

This is not a book of gushing, hazy optimism. This is not a book that tells you to deny when stuff sucks or to turn the other cheek when you've been completely screwed over. There will be no folksy sayings or cute but utterly ineffectual proverbs.

This is also not an academic study or history of Stoicism. There is plenty written about Stoicism out there, much of it by some of the wisest and greatest thinkers who ever lived. There is no need to rewrite what they have written—go read the originals. No philosophic writing is more accessible. It feels like it was written last year, not last millennium.

But I have done my best to collect, understand, and now publish their lessons and tricks. Ancient philosophy never cared much for authorship or originality—all writers did their best to translate and explain the wisdom of the greats as it has been passed down in books, diaries, songs, poems, and stories. All of these, refined in the crucible of human experience over thousands of years.

This book will share with you their collective wisdom in order to help you accomplish the very specific and increasingly urgent goal we all share: overcoming obstacles. Mental obstacles. Physical obstacles. Emotional obstacles. Perceived obstacles.

We face them every day and our society is collectively paralyzed by this. If all this book does is make facing and dismantling such stumbling blocks a little easier, it will be enough. But my aim is higher. I want to show you the way to turn every obstacle into an *advantage*.

So this will be a book of ruthless pragmatism and stories from history that illustrate the arts of relentless persistence and indefatigable ingenuity. It teaches you how to get unstuck, unfucked, and unleashed. How to turn the many negative situations we encounter in our lives into positive ones—or at least to snatch whatever benefit we can from them. To steal good fortune from misfortune.

It's not just: *How can I think* this is not so bad? No, it is how to will yourself to see that this must be good—an opportunity to gain a new foothold, move forward, or go in a better direction. Not “be positive” but learn to be ceaselessly creative and opportunistic.

Not: *This is not so bad.*

But: *I can make this good.*

Because it can be done. In fact, it has and *is* being done. Every day. That's the power we will unlock in this book.

## The Obstacles That Lie Before Us

There is an old Zen story about a king whose people had grown soft and entitled. Dissatisfied with this state of affairs, he hoped to teach them a lesson. His plan was simple: He would place a large boulder in the middle of the main road, completely blocking entry into the city. He would then hide nearby and observe their reactions.

How would they respond? Would they band together to remove it? Or would they get discouraged, quit, and return home?

With growing disappointment, the king watched as subject after subject came to this impediment and turned away. Or, at best, tried halfheartedly before giving up. Many openly complained or cursed the king or fortune or bemoaned the inconvenience, but none managed to do anything about it.

After several days, a lone peasant came along on his way into town. He did not turn away. Instead he strained and strained, trying to push it out of the way. Then an idea came to him: He scrambled into the nearby woods to find something he could use for leverage. Finally, he returned with a large branch he had crafted into a lever and deployed it to dislodge the massive rock from the road.

Beneath the rock were a purse of gold coins and a note from the king, which said:

*“The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget, within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition.”*

What holds you back?

The Physical? Size. Race. Distance. Disability. Money.

The Mental? Fear. Uncertainty. Inexperience. Prejudice.

Perhaps people don't take you seriously. Or you think you're too old. Or you lack support or enough resources. Maybe laws or regulations restrict your options. Or your obligations do. Or false goals and self-doubt.

Whatever it is, here you are. Here we all are.

*And . . .*

These are obstacles. I get it. No one is denying that.

But run down the list of those who came before you. Athletes who were too small. Pilots whose eyesight wasn't good enough. Dreamers ahead of their time. Members of this race or that. Dropouts and dyslexics. Bastards, immigrants, nouveaux riches, sticklers, believers, and dreamers. Or those who came from nothing or worse, from places where their very existence was threatened on a daily basis. What happened to them?

Well, far too many gave up. But a few didn't. They took “twice as good” as a challenge. They practiced harder. Looked for shortcuts and weak spots. Discerned allies among strange faces. Got kicked around a bit. *Everything* was an obstacle they had to flip.

And so?

Within those obstacles was an opportunity. They seized it. They did something special because of it. We can learn from them.

Whether we're having trouble getting a job, fighting against discrimination, running low on funds, stuck in a bad relationship, locking horns with some aggressive opponent, have an employee or student we just can't seem to reach, or are in the middle of a creative block, we need to know that there is a way. When we meet with adversity, we can turn it to advantage, based on their example.

All great victories, be they in politics, business, art, or seduction, involved resolving vexing problems with a potent cocktail of creativity, focus, and daring. When you have a goal, obstacles are actually teaching you how to get where you want to go—carving you a path. “The Things which hurt,” Benjamin Franklin wrote, “*instruct.*”

Today, most of our obstacles are internal, not external. Since World War II we have lived in some of the most prosperous times in history. There are fewer armies to face, fewer fatal diseases and far more safety nets. But the world still rarely does exactly what we want.

Instead of opposing enemies, we have internal tension. We have professional frustration. We have unmet expectations. We have learned helplessness. And we still have the same overwhelming emotions humans have always had: grief, pain, loss.

Many of our problems come from having too much: rapid technological disruption, junk food, traditions that tell us the way we're supposed to live our lives. We're soft, entitled, and scared of conflict. Great times are great softeners. Abundance can be its own obstacle, as many people can attest.

Our generation needs an approach for overcoming obstacles and thriving amid chaos more than ever. One that will help turn our problems on their heads, using them as canvases on which to paint master works. This flexible approach is fit for an entrepreneur or an artist, a conqueror or a coach, whether you're a struggling writer or a sage or a hardworking soccer mom.

## **The Way Through Them**

Objective judgment, now at this very moment.

Unselfish action, now at this very moment.

Willing acceptance—now at this very moment—of all external events.

That's all you need.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

Overcoming obstacles is a discipline of three critical steps.

It begins with how we look at our specific problems, our attitude or approach; then the energy and creativity with which we actively break them down and turn



them into opportunities; finally, the cultivation and maintenance of an inner will that allows us to handle defeat and difficulty.

It's three interdependent, interconnected, and fluidly contingent disciplines: *Perception, Action, and the Will*.

It's a simple process (but again, never easy).

We will trace the use of this process by its practitioners throughout history, business, and literature. As we look at specific examples of each step from every angle, we'll learn to inculcate this attitude and capture its ingenuity—and by doing so discover how to create new openings wherever a door is shut.

From the stories of the practitioners we'll learn how to handle common obstacles—whether we're locked out or hemmed in, the kind of obstacles that have impeded people for all time—and how to apply their general approach to our lives. Because obstacles are not only to be expected but embraced.

*Embraced?*

Yes, because these obstacles are actually opportunities to test ourselves, to try new things, and, ultimately, to triumph.

The Obstacle Is the Way.

## PART I

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# Perception

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WHAT IS PERCEPTION? It's how we see and understand what occurs around us—and what we decide those events will mean. Our perceptions can be a source of strength or of great weakness. If we are emotional, subjective and shortsighted, we only add to our troubles. To prevent becoming overwhelmed by the world around us, we must, as the ancients practiced, learn how to limit our passions and their control over our lives. It takes skill and discipline to bat away the pests of bad perceptions, to separate reliable signals from deceptive ones, to filter out prejudice, expectation, and fear. But it's worth it, for what's left is *truth*. While others are excited or afraid, we will remain calm and imperturbable. We will see things simply and straightforwardly, as they truly are—neither good nor bad. This will be an incredible advantage for us in the fight against obstacles.

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## THE DISCIPLINE OF PERCEPTION

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**B**efore he was an oilman, John D. Rockefeller was a bookkeeper and aspiring investor—a small-time financier in Cleveland, Ohio. The son of an alcoholic criminal who'd abandoned his family, the young Rockefeller took his first job in 1855 at the age of sixteen (a day he celebrated as “Job Day” for the rest of his life). All was well enough at fifty cents a day.

Then the panic struck. Specifically, the Panic of 1857, a massive national financial crisis that originated in Ohio and hit Cleveland particularly hard. As businesses failed and the price of grain plummeted across the country, westward expansion quickly came to a halt. The result was a crippling depression that lasted for several years.

Rockefeller could have gotten scared. Here was the greatest market depression in history and it hit him just as he was finally getting the hang of things. He could have pulled out and run like his father. He could have quit finance altogether for a different career with less risk. But even as a young man, Rockefeller had sangfroid: unflappable coolness under pressure. He could keep his head while he was losing his shirt. Better yet, he kept his head while everyone else lost theirs.

And so instead of bemoaning this economic upheaval, Rockefeller eagerly observed the momentous events. Almost perversely, he chose to look at it all as an opportunity to learn, a baptism in the market. He quietly saved his money and watched what others did wrong. He saw the weaknesses in the economy that many took for granted and how this left them all unprepared for change or shocks.

He internalized an important lesson that would stay with him forever: The market was inherently unpredictable and often vicious—only the rational and disciplined mind could hope to profit from it. Speculation led to disaster, he realized, and he needed to always ignore the “mad crowd” and its inclinations.

Rockefeller immediately put those insights to use. At twenty-five, a group of investors offered to invest approximately \$500,000 at his direction if he could find the right oil wells in which to deploy the money. Grateful for the opportunity, Rockefeller set out to tour the nearby oil fields. A few days later, he shocked his backers by returning to Cleveland empty-handed, not having spent or invested a

dollar of the funds. The opportunity didn't feel right to him at the time, no matter how excited the rest of the market was—so he refunded the money and stayed away from drilling.

It was this intense self-discipline and objectivity that allowed Rockefeller to seize advantage from obstacle after obstacle in his life, during the Civil War, and the panics of 1873, 1907, and 1929. As he once put it: He was inclined to see the opportunity in every disaster. To that we could add: He had the strength to resist temptation or excitement, no matter how seductive, no matter the situation.

Within twenty years of that first crisis, Rockefeller would alone control 90 percent of the oil market. His greedy competitors had perished. His nervous colleagues had sold their shares and left the business. His weak-hearted doubters had missed out.

For the rest of his life, the greater the chaos, the calmer Rockefeller would become, particularly when others around him were either panicked or mad with greed. He would make much of his fortune during these market fluctuations—because he could see while others could not. This insight lives on today in Warren Buffet's famous adage to "be fearful when others are greedy and greedy when others are fearful." Rockefeller, like all great investors, could resist impulse in favor of cold, hard common sense.

One critic, in awe of Rockefeller's empire, described the Standard Oil trust as a "mythical protean creature" capable of metamorphosing with every attempt by the competitors or the government to dismantle it. They meant it as a criticism, but it was actually a function of Rockefeller's personality: resilient, adaptable, calm, brilliant. He could not be rattled—not by economic crisis, not by a glittery mirage of false opportunities, not by aggressive, bullying enemies, not even by federal prosecutors (for whom he was a notoriously difficult witness to cross-examine, never rising to take the bait or defend himself or get upset).

Was he born this way? No. This was learned behavior. And Rockefeller got this lesson in discipline somewhere. It began in that crisis of 1857 in what he called "the school of adversity and stress."

"Oh, how blessed young men are who have to struggle for a foundation and beginning in life," he once said. "I shall never cease to be grateful for the three and half years of apprenticeship and the difficulties to be overcome, all along the way."

Of course, many people experienced the same perilous times as Rockefeller—they all attended the same school of bad times. But few reacted as he did. Not many had trained themselves to see opportunity inside this obstacle, that what befell them was not unsalvageable misfortune but the gift of education—a chance to *learn* from a rare moment in economic history.

You will come across obstacles in life—fair and unfair. And you will discover, time and time again, that what matters most is not what these obstacles are but how we see them, how we react to them, and whether we keep our composure. You will learn that this reaction determines how successful we will be in overcoming—or possibly thriving because of—them.