

Back from the Edge **Extraordinary Stories of Human Survival** **and how people did it**

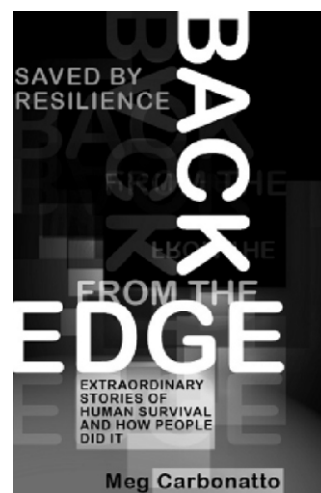
Meg Carbonatto

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Reviewer John Kingston, MNZAC



Rob Hewitt was drawn from the water after 75 hours at sea. His skin had begun to separate from his body, his mind was barely holding on - but he survived. People said it was like a miracle. How did he do it, how did he cope? In her book *Back from the Edge*, Psychosynthesis oriented psychotherapist Meg Carbonatto asks this question, both of Rob Hewitt and also fourteen other extraordinary New Zealanders and Australians whose resilience in the face of serious adversity both inspires and instructs.

Her subjects are a diverse bunch of modern day heroes who each in their own way reveals an alchemy by which the slings and arrows of life are transformed. These people have been, or are, faced with serious challenges. Along with Hewitt there is a young Afghan refugee from the Tampa; an Aboriginal member of the "stolen generation"; a woman recovering from the death of her child, the end of her marriage, and cancer; a man dealing with the aftermath of a motorcar accident in which three people die; and a man facing impending death from prostate cancer. Carbonatto devotes a chapter to each.

First she tells the person's story, encouraging us to identify with their predicaments. Later she identifies and analyses the different capacities of resilience which each person possesses or has developed: goal setting, mindfulness, dis-identification, learned optimism, developing compassion, finding meaning and purpose, forgiveness, surrender, and so on. These are

extraordinary people, yes, but the qualities of resilience they exemplify can be developed by all. This is Carbonatto's thesis in this book of hardship and hope.

Roberto Assagioli's groundbreaking exploration of the functions and development of will is, when not explicit, just below the surface of every page. Resilience, as Carbonatto formulates it, is an expression of will, and will can be refined and strengthened. As well as Assagioli she draws on a wide range of clinical and research findings to help unravel the strategies to survive and thrive, which her subjects embody.

Concluding each chapter is a section entitled, "A takeaway offering." Focusing on the skills and capacities which support resilience and which are revealed in each person's story, Carbonatto offers simple exercises in dis-identification, finding purpose and meaning, mindfulness and developing compassion. Books have been written on each of these subjects and these exercises offer only a taste of the qualities being developed. People seeking further elaboration will find source material in the references at the back.

This book is probably more suited to the general public than those in the helping professions. It is informative and inspiring. It provides a solid first step for people seeking direction in facing serious challenges.

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