



Why Anti-Fragility Breeds Success (And How Nature Focuses On It)

Three Month Vacation Podcast

Sean: This is the Three Month Vacation and I'm Sean D'Souza. In the year 2000 we had moved to New Zealand from India. When we moved to New Zealand we didn't really know anyone here. We'd never been to New Zealand. We just chose to come here, and then in 2001 we decided we were going to stay here, so we had to get on a flight and go back and sell our apartment and sell all the stuff that we had there and just close up everything in India.

While I was on the flight I had a book with me. It was called Good to Great. It's a book by Jim Collins. I'm not sure why I picked it up. Maybe it was the title. As I was reading that book on the flight, something happened to me that changed my mindset. What was my mindset at that point in time? It was a complete jumble of facts. We'd got to New Zealand. We'd bought a house within three months of getting here. I'd got a job; I last at the job for six months and then I was made redundant.

The question is were we feeling fragile. That's what we're going to cover today. We're going to talk about this concept of anti-fragility. Anti-fragility is just not being fragile, it is the opposite of fragile. I used to drink rum and Coke back then, and while I'm at 35,000 feet I'm drinking my rum and Coke and chomping my peanuts, and reading about the Stockdale paradox.

This is about a guy called James Stockdale. He was in prison in the Vietnam War and he was the highest ranking officer at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, which was a prisoner of war camp. From 1965 to 1973 he was tortured over 20 times. On page 85 of the book there is this conversation between the author, Jim Collins, and Stockdale. Jim Collins is asking Stockdale who didn't make it out of the prison camp. Stockdale says, "Oh, that's easy. The optimists didn't make it."

That causes Jim Collins to be completely confused. He says, "I don't understand. Why the optimists?" Stockdale says, "The optimists always thought that things would get better, so they would say we'd be out by Christmas, and then Christmas would come and Christmas would go. Then they'd say we'd be out by Easter, and then Easter would come and Easter would go. Then they would say we'll be out by Thanksgiving, and Thanksgiving would come and suddenly it would be Christmas again. Eventually they died of a broken heart."

Optimism, it seems, can be very fragile. In his book, Nassim Taleb talks about this concept of anti-fragility. The book, by the way, is called Antifragile. Fragile is something like glass. It drops to the floor and it breaks into a thousand pieces. Then you have something which is resilient and that is a piece of metal. That doesn't break, but nothing changes it. As soon as something hits it, it falls to the floor, nothing changes it. It remains exactly the same.

Then there is something in between. That in between thing, that is anti-fragile. That's someone like James Stockdale where you get battered and hit and punished and pushed around. Everything comes at you, good times, bad times, and you change but you become stronger. I always thought that being resilient was powerful, but resilient, as Nassim Taleb describes it, is being like that block of steel. Nothing happens to it. It doesn't change, and you want to change. You want to improve. You want to get better.

What makes anti-fragility so important? We'll cover three topics as we always do, and then we'll have a clear action plan, just one thing that you can do. In today's episode we're going to talk about chaos and how it becomes part of our life. The second thing that we're going to talk about, how anti-fragility makes us twice as strong, and third, how all of this prepares us for the unknown.

Let's start out with the first one, which is battling chaos. Whenever you run into people you're always finding that they're struggling. They're always talking about how difficult things are. What they're really doing is they're battling chaos. When you're fragile, every single thing that comes your way causes you to fall and break into a thousand pieces. Then you have to stick yourself together again, and that's very difficult.

On the other hand, you have people who are like steel objects and nothing changes them. You want to be somewhere in the middle. You want to understand that chaos is your best friend, that every single day of your life, it doesn't matter where you live or what you do, there is going to be an element of chaos.

The people who are antifragile make a friend out of chaos. They go, "Okay, what I'm going to do is I'm going to run into chaos and it's going to take up an hour, two hours, three hours of my day, so I'm going to make an appointment with chaos. I'm going to keep three hours separate."

The people who are fragile, they don't understand this. They think somehow that they will get through the day without that factor of chaos hitting them. Then when chaos hits them they don't know how to react so they fall to pieces.

One of the main factors that you have to understand when you battle chaos is that it exists. It exists every single day, every single week, every single month of your life. Chaos is going to exist. If you don't plan for it, if you don't make an appointment with chaos, then nothing happens, or rather, the worst happens. You get hit by chaos. You're not prepared for it, and you fall to pieces.

The people who are antifragile, they accept chaos for what it is. Let me give you an example. Let's say we're getting on a flight, say a week from now. When do we pack our bags? The fragile people, they're packing their bags until the very last minute. Then chaos hits you. If you're antifragile you're prepared for that chaos. You're prepared for something to go wrong so you've decided that the flight is going to leave four or five days earlier. You've got all your stuff, all your bags packed five days earlier as if you're going to go to the airport right now. Then if chaos hits you you don't care because you're prepared for it. The core of fragility comes from this factor of chaos, this factor of pretending that Christmas will come and Easter will come and Thanksgiving will come and things will be better. But things are what they are. Chaos is what it is and you just have to make friends with chaos, make an appointment. That's your first step towards anti-fragility.

This takes us to the second step, which is how it makes you twice as strong. When we go back to the book Antifragile by Nassim Taleb, he talks about this ancient Greek mythological creature. It's called a hydra. The hydra is a serpent-like creature, and you have to battle this creature. Of course you go there with your sword and then you try to chop off its head but it's got many heads. You think I'll just cut off the heads. You chop off one head and two heads grow in its place. Then you cut off the other head and two more heads grow in its place.

Suddenly you see this is a crazy battle. You cannot win this battle. When we put ourselves back in that Vietnam War and we see Stockdale's captors and they're trying to get him to do stuff or not do stuff ... At one point in time they wanted to present him as a well treated prisoner so he took a razor and he disfigured himself so that he could not be represented as a well treated prisoner.

Exchanged secret intelligence information in letters to his wife. He knew that if they found out, and when they found out, there would be more torture. This is the point of people who are antifragile. They understand this concept of becoming twice as strong. It's not just about falling to pieces. It's you get at me and I will become twice as strong. I will be the hydra.

Getting to New Zealand was an adventure. It was an amazing adventure. It was something that couldn't be foreseen, because as I said, we'd never been here before. Yet all of these things hit us together: the loss of a job, the mortgage, everything altogether. Those who are fragile, they want this certainty. They want this map in advance. We're going to do this on this day and this person's going to show up on that day and this is how your life is going to unfold. They may not admit it but that's exactly what they want. They want things mapped out for them. That's why when things hit them they get rattled and fall apart.

Nassim Taleb talks about the whole economic crisis and why everything falls apart. It is because everything is being shielded. The banks are too big to fail. The economy will fall apart if we get rid of these people. That's the problem. When we make things fragile, when we make our kids fragile, when we make ourselves fragile, when we expect that everything will go according to today's schedule, then we can't be the hydra. We can't grow two heads every time someone cuts off one head. That's the critical part. Anti-fragility enables you to become twice as strong.

There is a third part to anti-fragility, and that is to prepare yourself for the unknown. I know that I'm saying that this is the third part, but when you think of the first part and you think of the second part, which is the chaos and twice as strong, you're going to be prepared for the unknown. The reason why you're prepared for the unknown is because you're not expecting life to unfold just as you wrote it down. You have this saying: planning is priceless but plans are useless. You go through with the plan and you plan for chaos, and chaos will show up.

Let me give you an example. One of the courses that we conduct at Psychotactics is called the [article-writing course](#). We're in the last stages of the article-writing course. There are a few things that I get the participants to do before they finish the course. The first thing that I get them to do is to give me feedback. Feedback may sound like testimonials but feedback is not a testimonial. Feedback is that screeching sound you hear when two mics come into the range of each other. That's feedback. They have to tell me everything that is wrong with the course, everything that is wrong with my teaching, everything that is wrong with anything to do with what they've just gone through.

I want you to be the trainer in this case and I want you to step back and think of the chaos that's going to hit you. You are actually asking people to tell you what is wrong. What are they going to do? They do, they tell you what is wrong. So far we have got 25 recommendations in the last 24 hours, 25 new things, new structures that we have to put in place. This is for a course that has been running since 2006. You know what happened the last time we had this course? They probably made 25 recommendations as well, and the time before that they made 25 recommendations as well.

Chaos has to be my friend, right? I have to make an appointment with chaos. There is this course that people absolutely love, this course that people are willing to sign up six months, eight months in advance, that when we release it it fills up in less than an hour yet, 25 recommendations, 25 fixes, 25 structural jigsaws to put together? That's what you have to do. You have to be antifragile. You have to put yourself out on there. Of course you will get recommendations.

Now when you are the student making the recommendation, you are simply giving your feedback. You're being as constructive as possible, but for you, the teacher, the trainer, the book author, it's like someone attacking your baby and saying there are 25 things wrong with your baby, and wait a second, we're not done yet. There are still more to come. If you don't make chaos your best friend, you don't make an appointment with this chaos and these 25 changes that you have to make, then chaos will come along. Clients will leave. They'll be upset. They won't tell you anything. If you confront chaos, then you become antifragile. You don't become that piece of steel and you don't become that piece of glass. You become the in between, the hydra. You step into the battle and the sword is coming straight for your head, and you better be prepared for it.

When that sword comes and chops off your head, it makes you twice as strong. All of those 25 amendments and the structural changes and all that stuff, it's going to take a month, maybe two months of extremely hard work on top of everything else that has to be done on a daily basis. That's going to make us twice as strong. Then next year when we do the course, again it's the same thing all over again. There are going to be 25 amendments or changes or recommendations.

How do we know this to be true? Because look at your phone, look at your software. The moment a new phone comes along, everyone is all excited and then you find all the glitches with that phone, all the things that could be better. All these glitches go back into that system, and the company that decides we're going to fix it, we're going to make a bigger screen, we're going to make a sharper screen, we're going to do this and do that, they're the ones that are expecting the chaos.

They're the one that know that the feedback, brutal as it is, is going to make them twice as strong, that the next version is going to be a better version.

It's this concept of antifragile that makes them ready for the unknown, because we don't what's around the corner. Whether you are manufacturing phones, doing a course, writing a book, you don't know what's around the corner. Being prepared for it in this way by being antifragile is what makes a difference.

The biggest problem with people who are fragile is they don't see themselves as fragile. They see other people as fragile but they don't see themselves as fragile. How do you become antifragile? The only way to become antifragile is to ask for brutal feedback. I know that some of you listening to this podcast say it's feet forward or something else, but eventually it's feedback. It's terrible. It feels miserable. It's not like I went through the last 48 hours feeling like I was the king of the world. You feel like you put in so much work and it almost seems like why do I do this to myself.

Stockdale would have that answer for you, because for Stockdale it was the end game that mattered, how you became twice as strong with all the beatings and all the imprisonment and all of the stuff that affected you, you became stronger. That change, that brutal change, it makes you stronger, not weaker. The weak, they seek plans and lack of chaos, and certainty. That's not how life pans out, and that's when you get brittle and you fall apart.

Let's just summarize what we've covered today. We talked about the three factors. The first one was battling chaos, the whole concept of making an appointment with chaos and then expecting that it's going to show up. That's what makes you antifragile in the first instance. When you go out there and you expose yourself and ask for feedback, brutal feedback ... I don't like any other word but brutal feedback because it feels brutal. That makes you twice as strong. What it does on a third level is it prepares you for the unknown. That unknown is coming whether you like it or not. Clients are going to leave whether you like it or not. When you know about it, when they give you their feedback, you can take corrective action and you can make it better. That's really what anti-fragility, in my world at least, is all about.

What's the one thing that you can do? Ask for brutal feedback. Don't sugarcoat it. You are going to get brutal feedback. When you get brutal feedback, you expect that you're going to feel miserable for the next two, three days, a week, however long it takes you to recover. When you recover, you come back like that hydra: stronger than ever before.

That brings us to the end of this episode, a longer episode, almost 20 minutes and still edging forward. What's happening next? In about ten days we're headed to the US. We're doing the workshop on information products, on how to structure your information products. If you haven't already got the workshop, you might want to get the home study version. It's not as great as the workshop. The workshop is a lot of fun. There's Elmo; there are soft toys; there's food; there's stuff that you don't find at other workshops. If you haven't got to this workshop you will get to another Psychotactics workshop in the future.

We then head over to Denver. I'm speaking at the Denver Opera House on pricing, talking about pricing. The book on pricing, the prices have gone up, as you'll expect but it's still at a reasonable price. Go to psychotactics.com. You will find the search bar on the right hand side and you won't find a sales page on the pricing book, but if you type in "trust the chef" you will be taken to the page, and yes, there is not a lot there but the book is really good. That's trust the chef. Find it in the search bar at psychotactics.com. If you want to get in touch, sean@psychotactics.com or I'm at Twitter @Sean D'Souza and on Facebook at Sean D'Souza as well. This has been brought to you by the Three Month Vacation, and we're headed for one of those months shortly, and psychotactics.com. If you're not already a subscriber, here's your cue. Bye for now.

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