

EREZ Avramov

Changing the Conversation on Resiliency

Interview with Jeff Tiessen

Erez Avramov, nicknamed the “Man who Refuses to Die”, is an internationally-recognized resiliency expert who’s been trained and shaped by life’s most challenging adversities. Three near-death experiences and an elective amputation have given Avramov a unique perspective on life.

Deeply driven to explore human potential, Avramov has uncovered the inner workings of resiliency and is the founder of Life Rebuilder Academy. He shares his methods with his clients and audiences so others can harness the power of adversity and transform their lives as well.

Avramov changes the conversation from “why did this happen?” to “how can I use it to transform my life?” Avramov was a recent guest on the Life & Limb podcast hosted by thrive publisher Jeff Tiessen and what follows are some highlights from that interview.

thrive: *Let's start with your nickname. You're no stranger to adversity and trauma. You were close to numerous blasts as a soldier, and then three near-death experiences. A near-fatal car accident, a crash on a motorcycle training for a monumental race, and then what you say was your toughest challenge, a heart attack that brought you closer to mortality than any of the others. Hard to believe, but this is your story right?*

EREZ: When somebody else describes it, it's almost a scene from a movie or a book or something. And because I'm on the other side of these particular events, I think I'm able today to share more of my perspective in retrospect versus when I was immersed in those traumatic events. Going through a traumatic event, be it with our health or a relationship or even financial, it doesn't matter. It shakes up our life in a drastic manner.

There is a process we have to go through. Our level of preparation and support will dictate the outcome. I was introduced to the "muscle of resilience" from a very young age. I grew up in a country, Israel, that is very volatile by nature. I left almost 28 years ago. I am programmed to push my human boundaries and go beyond them. Since I was 15 years old, I went on solo adventures in the amazing deserts of Israel. I served in an elite commando unit in the Israeli Air Force where we were trained to ignore feelings of fear and danger and go where no one will dare. This is a human-based approach to how we would interact in life. It was the unpredictability of life and understanding that sometimes even what we figure to be our path or plan, life has a very different plan.

thrive: *So, how did that translate or apply to the trauma that you experienced here in Canada?*

EREZ: That's where I feel resilience comes into play. When you're in the midst of a crisis is where the real test begins. But I also understand how difficult it is to see it when you're in the midst of it.

thrive: *But three times, and maybe more as a soldier. Does it compound or are there lessons learned in each that helped with the next, or were you just thinking "What? Again?"*

EREZ: That's a beautiful question. And I know for some people who go through several events, it becomes sometimes a question of "Why is this happening to me? Why am I again in this situation?" The compounding effect for me was to stop asking that question. Because the question of "why" I found to lead nowhere. It's a dead-end road. When you start to venture into the why and you're looking for reasons, very quickly you start to point fingers at yourself. "What did I do wrong? How did I end up here?" I found this to be a very traumatizing cycle. You're not going to find an answer because that answer often doesn't exist.

thrive: *Let's lean into life as an amputee and the years of recovery before your amputation. Multiple surgeries, intense pain and your decision to have your leg amputated below your knee. How did you make such a decision which I'd presume to be really, really difficult?*

EREZ: It was a very, very difficult decision. And just to put things in context a little bit, I'll share how I ended up even asking, "should I amputate or not?" I was involved in a very traumatic car accident in 2011.

A head-on collision with a fully loaded semi-truck catapulted my life on a journey like no other. It was in a snow storm here in British Columbia on a notorious highway leading from Vancouver to Kelowna. I hit a patch of black ice. My car spun out of control into a concrete median that separated the two lanes. I hit with such velocity that it launched the car into the air. I landed on the roof of the car, sliding into the opposite lane, straight into the truck. I was stuck in that vehicle for two and a half hours before the rescue team was able to come.

I was trapped between the dashboard and the engine which crushed my leg. Multiple injuries. I broke all my ribs, my sternum was broken exposing my heart, internal bleeding,





When I proposed elective amputation, my first orthopedic surgeon felt that it was the biggest mistake I could make. “More surgeries and then make a decision,” he said. I refused. I spoke with other people who went through fusions and different types of reconstructive surgery. They were in and out of hospital all the time and struggling with complications and infections. I had so much pain at that point, I was ready. The amputees who I spoke to gave me

a lot of confidence in the direction that I was about to go.

thrive: *Despite being very singularly focused on the amputation, you loved adventure and the risks that come with it. How did that impact your recovery and identity, and pathway forward as an amputee?*

EREZ: I love the question. It was an incredible journey. It was all about survival and recovery. It was a precision approach throughout my whole process. For me, it was like a military operation. I knew the discipline that was needed. But my life changed. It changed the way I would show up as a father. And I remember waking up and seeing no leg below the knee; that’s when I broke. That’s when I understood that if I keep fighting all the time, this will be a very difficult journey. I said it to myself, but I couldn’t act on it. What I did was exactly the opposite because I didn’t know how to really let go. I actually doubled down on my fighter identity. That’s when my ego really took a hit.

thrive: *Have you ever regretted the decision to amputate?*

EREZ: I had some complications after the surgery. It took about three

months to get a prosthesis fitted. I had a lot of skin issues and I suffered tremendously from phantom limb pain. I was warned ahead of time and I researched it. But, oh boy, when it came, that was the worst pain I’ve ever experienced in my life. It was horrific. I thought prior to the amputation I was in terrible pain. This was a whole different category of pain. I wouldn’t say that I questioned the decision because I knew there was a way to work with phantom limb pain.

I knew that there were no guarantees for a good recovery, or an easy recovery. But it changed my life for the better. It was the best decision for me that I’ve made.

thrive: *You’ve talked about experiencing the “darkest night of the soul” but you also say that that darkest night has the potential to be our greatest gift with the right tools. That’s probably hard for people to appreciate when they’re in those dark times. What are those tools and how did you find them?*

EREZ: For me there was a very powerful process of self discovery. I realized very quickly that it doesn’t matter how much I tried to manage what was going on, my mind could dictate my ability to participate in a healthier way and move through the process. That doesn’t mean that it resolves it immediately though.

With trauma, I believe a lot of our old patterns rise to the surface and manage our worldview, like what’s possible and what’s not. When we become victim-oriented, my God, this is a feast for the mind. That’s when you go down that dark night of the soul and it’s very difficult to come out of it. And I was in that horrible place, dark and hopeless. And those thoughts become belief systems which can run your life.

dislocated arm, broken leg in 17 places. It was a horrific accident. Surgeons initially thought to amputate above the knee, but they saved it. But, my ankle, which was crushed, became my nemesis.

I was in a wheelchair. The pain was unbearable on all fronts. That’s when I really had to contemplate my options? Surgeons wanted to try this and try that. And that’s when I started to understand that advocating for my own health is really important. I appreciated that what doctors recommend comes from their experience. But I wanted my life back.

thrive: *What kind of research did you do before deciding on an elective amputation?*

EREZ: It was about a year and a half of preparation. I took to learning how the body works, and how the mind works... it was almost PhD-level research... to understand what it means to live with an amputation. I interviewed a lot of amputees, active amputees, and I said, “Wow, if I even have 50 percent of their capabilities I’ll be a happy camper.” The openness from the community, and from prosthetists, allowed me to understand what day-to-day life looks like.

“It’s not about what happened to you; it’s how you deal with it. As amputees, we have to advocate for our own health. If we don’t, we limit our opportunities.”

I owe a great debt of gratitude to neuroscience, spirituality and eastern methodologies around mindfulness for helping me understand that we all create a story in our mind and then we create a life to represent that story. I came to understand so well what is needed to recover properly... lifestyle habits, nutrition, sleep, stress management, relaxation. I chose to be very, very precise on those fronts. But that choice requires a transformation and that is something I accepted as a challenge.

thrive: *Resiliency. There’s a general understanding of the term, but you’ve modified it. I want to ask you what resiliency means to you?*

EREZ: The traditional definition of resilience is to bounce back, going back to the state that you were in before. If your thought pattern is to go back to where you were prior to crisis or trauma, you’re not going forward. I’m a student of life and I’m very curious about it, and when I started to dive deeper into the academic world of resilience I just couldn’t agree with academic research. When you think about resilience in life, how we develop it, and it as a skill set, it’s developed in the trenches, not by reading books.

There’s a process to develop it in a very powerful way that allows you to transform. That became my passion and my guiding light. I find that resilience is about bouncing forward, not bouncing back. It’s about self love and compassion and empathy more than anything else.

thrive: *Let’s wrap up with what you are doing now, professionally.*

EREZ: My career has changed several times since my accident and amputation. I’ve moved into more public speaking and training for corporations and for individuals. I offer a helpful resource called the Resilience Assessment. It’s complimentary. It gives an overall picture of where you are right now in four areas of life, including health and relationships. Then we can create a roadmap using systems and tools that I have developed.

I’ve also created an online course on Mirror Therapy for phantom limb pain from my personal experience. Mirror therapy can be an awkward therapy module. There just isn’t a lot of research to support it. No scientific explanation. With mirror therapy, essentially, the missing limb is hidden and the patient mimics what is seen and felt in the sound limb. Concentrating on the healthy limb, you mindfully mirror those thoughts toward your missing limb.

There are no guarantees. It may not work for everyone. It’s not a magic pill. But it has been proven to be a very powerful process that can at least alleviate some phantom limb pain. In my situation it eliminated it from a scale of nine to 10 all the time to almost zero. It’s not medical advice. It’s me personally sharing

how to do it. But I did work with a doctor and a physiotherapist to develop the course. It’s on Udemy. Just go to Udemy and search Mirror Therapy. For the resilience assessment go to my website www.erezavramov.com.

thrive: *Any final words of wisdom?*

EREZ: Yeah. It’s a joy to share. I found that one of the biggest factors for success is reaching out and asking for help when you need it. It took me a while, but today I don’t hesitate. If I need help, I ask for it immediately. And it’s not about what happened to you; it’s how you deal with it. As amputees, we have to advocate for our own health. If we don’t, we limit our opportunities.

But we are all different and we all have our conditional ways of how we deal with the unexpected – there’s no right or wrong. There’s only a choice and we are the ones that make it. We are so much more than our physical bodies.



Photos courtesy of Erez Avramov