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# Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



## Building Resilience

Our lives are full of ups and downs that bring joy and challenges. The variation and somewhat unpredictable nature of life's moments can make us feel like we are on a rollercoaster of experiences and emotions at different times. When we know what these events are doing, we can respond to them with more tools we have built up in ourselves, and something often referred to as resilience. Recognizing the psychological and physiological effects that result is an essential skill.

Many people, however, are finding that they are increasingly overwhelmed. The skill bank that could help them respond and react healthily to these twists and turns is low. Instead, people might become more withdrawn and inward-focused, reluctant to reach out for help. Still, others may find the courage to seek assistance but encounter quick fixes instead of learning about their automatic responses to stressors. If they can recognize their usual reactions, they might be able to begin moving forward down a path of learning how to build and become more resilient.

This article will explain resilience and why it is a valuable life skill to nurture. It will also look at personal and workplace

situations where resilience is needed. Finally, we'll explore proven ways to handle stress and help you understand the connection between addressing stressors and building resilience. The approach you take could be a game-changer. It might allow you to develop positive practices for recognizing stress and counteract its harmful effects on your body, both physically and mentally.

### What is resilience?

Resilience is simply an awareness of how we react when we are under stress because of changes in our surroundings. It's often described as an inner strength that "helps you rebound from a setback or challenge such as a job loss, an illness, a disaster or a loved one's death."<sup>1</sup> Another way to look at it is to continue functioning when these things happen and tap into healthy coping mechanisms that allow us to feel well and protect us from becoming overwhelmed. We all like to think we are mostly well-equipped to handle the different pressures and difficulties that we encounter throughout our lives. It's important to realize that even if you are "relatively self-aware and emotionally adept, struggles can take us by surprise."<sup>2</sup>

But feeling resilient doesn't mean you don't experience "anger, grief and pain" or put up "with something difficult, being stoic or figuring it out on your own."<sup>3</sup> Processing physical and emotional responses with resilience means that we can experience more consistency. Getting the help and support needed to process life's challenges is at the heart of preserving your well-being.

#### Resilience has several dimensions to consider:

- Cognitive – how we assess a stressful situation and negotiate it with coping skills
- Behavioural – good habits we have developed and maintain that help us face difficulties
- Motivational – being able to maintain a sense of purpose, stay committed and have a sense of direction
- Existential/Spiritual – believing that there is a meaning and purpose to life that is bigger than us
- Relational – being able to stay connected and involved with people we care about and our communities
- Emotional – being able to process negative feelings in a way that preserves our confidence and helps us maintain hope<sup>4</sup>

#### When we aren't feeling resilient, we tend to deal with stressful situations with more difficulty. It can mean that we:

- Focus on the negative aspects of problems
- Feel victimized and overwhelmed
- Turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, eating disorders and other types of risky behaviours
- Experience irrational or illogical thinking

### How to build resilience

Several strategies and skills you can develop will help you become more resilient. These can be used when you encounter stress and challenges within your life's personal and professional aspects.

**Expressive writing** helps you change the narrative about something challenging or upsetting, allowing you to move away from focusing on the event repeatedly. Writing freely for 20 minutes is enough to let you think about how you feel, confront your thoughts, and change your perspective. You shouldn't worry about your writing or feeling inhibited, and don't just record your daily activities. No one is going to look

at what you're writing. One study showed that after three weeks of practicing this daily, people felt more grounded, connected, and less pessimistic.<sup>6</sup>

**Overcoming fear** can help address experiences you're struggling with by allowing you to acknowledge and feel the emotions you hold on to. It can be helpful in cases where people are afraid of flying, public speaking, heights, or more. You can start small, exposing yourself to the fear in small and controlled doses, then "over time, you can incrementally increase the challenge."<sup>7</sup> The long-term goal is to change the association you've held onto that created the fear, give you more awareness, and work through it.

We have a natural tendency to look inward when we feel overwhelmed. **Being aware of how you treat yourself** and how minds and bodies are connected encourages you to be more gentle and less judgemental. There are three parts to this:

1. When mindful of your feelings, try acknowledging and naming them. For example, if you are experiencing stress, you can say, "this is stress," and "this is hard," or "it hurts."
2. The ability to experience deep emotion is part of our human lives. While we individually have different triggers, acknowledging that it's normal to feel this way and that others do so can help you move forward and not get stuck.
3. Accept where you are now and ask yourself to be patient while you process your feelings associated with the experience. Think about how you would treat a friend in the same situation you are experiencing, then apply that to yourself. It's generally a more compassionate and kind approach.<sup>8</sup>

**Develop a meditation and mindfulness practice** that helps you focus on releasing the past, live in the present, and not worry about the future. Spending just 5 or 10 minutes each day to be still and concentrate on your breathing is a great place to start. Focus on how your breath moves through your body from head to toe. It can help you sort through complicated thoughts and feelings and let go of physical responses (like tightened muscles and stomach knots. You'll find that you start to relax and, more importantly, realize that things will be okay. Meditation also allows your body to clean out emotions that have been building up, making you vulnerable to feeling like you are spiralling out of control. It's also a fantastic way to reduce stress.<sup>9</sup>

**You might also focus on how you are eating.** Being mindful when consuming a morsel of food enables you to take time to taste, determine the extent of the flavours, experience the texture and aroma, and chew more thoroughly before swallowing. You become more aware of food's essential role in nourishing our bodies.<sup>10</sup>

**Learn how to forgive yourself.** We often feel we must forgive others and share that with them. That isn't always necessary, though. The first person you may want to focus attention on is you. It's okay to acknowledge what YOU experienced: the feelings, emotions, and even how it made you feel. Your feelings are valid. Take time to think about how your experience is affecting your life now. Move towards letting go of whatever it is to help you release the feelings of resentment you've carried. Don't deny yourself the opportunity to speak your truth. It can help you become unstuck and allow you to grow. You also don't need to mention the forgiveness to anyone else who may have been involved. Focus on this gift to yourself. You may even notice you feel better emotionally and experience physical changes soon after.<sup>11</sup>

## There are benefits to building resilience at work, too!

When you need to build resilience in the workplace, consider using some of those practices we've already shared. You'll develop greater awareness of how your body responds to stressors at work. For example, muscle tension, illness, headaches, avoidance, aggression, and changes in breathing are all examples of your body indicating that it is under stress.

Workplaces evolve and change, and that can create stress. For resilient workplaces to exist, people must first develop personal resilience. Only then will there be a foundation to establish positive practices and models that will be effective. Recognizing stressors and applying principles of resilience, personally and within the organization, can help employers manage and take advantage of built-up resilience.<sup>12</sup>

### Some excellent practices include<sup>13</sup>:

- Supporting change culture by welcoming "experimentation, failure and learning."<sup>14</sup>
- Balancing "adversity and stability" because too much of either can be damaging.<sup>15</sup>
- Building in recovery time when the organization is experiencing a period where there is high stress and much to do.

- Supporting healthy discussion and reflection on changes.
- Offering individuals training to invest in personal resilience by providing access to mental health services and demonstrating flexibility.

## The importance of tackling stress

Unaddressed stress can have severe physical and mental consequences on your health. You can experience addiction, heart disease, mental health struggles, chronic illness and more. Recognizing that while "we can't always eliminate the source of stress, but we can consciously change the way we respond to it" is one way that we can start to tackle it.<sup>16</sup>

### Try focusing on building resilience and reducing stress by allowing time to:

- Shift your perspective
- Create small, attainable goals that you take time to celebrate when completed
- Commit to addressing stress in your life by making a list of things that you can control, and those that you can't
- Practice self-care in whatever way feels good for you, including regular exercise and movement
- Grow as a person by expressing gratitude for the little things you appreciate in life
- Try to reset your nervous system by trying practices like yoga, forest bathing, singing, chanting, and humming
- Maintain connections to your community<sup>17</sup>

You may also want to explore the newest range of wearable devices. Technology has advanced, so we can now use these devices to monitor physical and mental health indicators. They can help us develop greater awareness of when we are exhibiting signs of stress within our bodies. Watches, rings, bracelets, headbands, and even intelligent clothing can alert us to signs of stress that we may typically ignore. With awareness of the stress, we can build resilience and take a more active part in supporting our well-being.<sup>18</sup>

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