

Building resilience

Understanding resilience, the benefits of cultivating it and how we can sustain ourselves



Why is it important?

Research has shown that an individual's personal level of resilience can have a profound impact on how they experience work and life:

"More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails."

HBR, May, 2002: page 48

Moreover, Accenture (2010) discovered that 71% of corporate leaders see resilience as extremely important when deciding on who to retain.

This is perhaps of no surprise given the widely-recognised increasing levels of uncertainty in today's world and the increasing expectations of needing to do more with reducing resources.

Building resilience is increasingly being seen as a shield to protect our psychological well-being

(Robertson Cooper, 2013) within this increasingly pressured environment. Such resilience has been proven to support an improved physical health leading to reduction in: heart disease, high blood pressure, sleep disturbance, immune system dysfunction (Ostir et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 2003; Diener and Chan, 2011). Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why resilience is becoming more topical in today's society.

As well as being important to us, building resilience is becoming more relevant. In the past some believed that resilience was something that you were born with, it being genetically-linked. However, research during the past 30-40 years has consistently demonstrated that resilience is something that we can learn and develop.

How can we define resilience?

When reviewing the literature, there can be seen to be an evolution in how resilience has been defined:

"Staying flexible in thoughts, feelings and behaviour in the face of pressure so that we emerge stronger, wiser and more able."

Dr Carole Pemberton as presented at the CDI 2014 Annual Conference, Glasgow

In the past resilience was emphasised as someone's ability to bounce back and remain resolute and strong when faced with pressure. However, more recent findings emphasise the importance of remaining agile within such adverse conditions, enabling us to be adaptive and grow through such challenging experiences.

What are the characteristics of resilient people?

When scanning across all prevalent resilience research, there are three recurring characteristics demonstrated by those identified as being resilient:

Building resilience

1. **Acceptance of reality** – rather than being blindly optimistic, showing an ability to distinguish between those aspects of life that are controllable and those that aren't
2. **Life is meaningful** – cultivating a sense of purpose and meaning perhaps through surfacing and acknowledging core personal beliefs and values even in hard times
3. **Uncanny ability to improvise** – demonstrating the ability to create something out of nothing, using ingenuity and adaptability to reuse resources in new ways

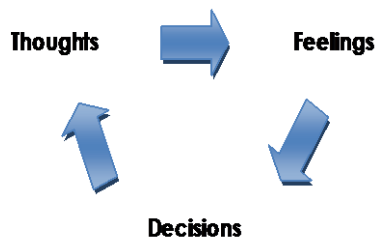
In contrast, individuals who fell at the first hurdle and found it hard to learn through adversity showed signs of learnt helplessness, allowing their negative emotions to take hold and seeing a generalised negative outlook in life where there was no possibility for improvement.

How can we build resilience?

Given these insights, we can each hone and develop our personal levels of resilience in many ways:

- **Retain a perspective** – recognise what we can control and what is beyond our control. Focus on those things that can be changed and let go of trying to change the things that we can't

- **Learning mind-set** – cultivate personal curiosity and habits to encourage learning in work and life. Think about how we can remember the insights and learning and use these going forward
- **Reflection time** – such learning can be enhanced through personal reflection time. Consider what we could do to create time for reflection. Think about where we could go to make this easier
- **Managing our thoughts** – noticing and letting go of negative thoughts helps us to feel better. Focusing on positives enables us to have a better life experience and make better decisions



- **Managing our energy** – our personal energy is one of our most important resources. Consider and focus on those activities and relationships in our life that supports us in fostering our energy
- **Finding a purposeful direction** – through understanding our core beliefs and values, establish a meaningful purpose in life. Consider the legacy that we may want to be remembered for

Top tip



Have a look at the ideas of how to build resilience.

Which ones appeal to you?

Consider what habits you could create in your life to help you to build and sustain your resilience.

How could you weave these into your way of living? What changes would you need to make?

How can we stay resilient?

Having developed our personal resilience we can remain robust by taking care and adapting helpful habits, including: good diet, sleep, physical activity, mental exercise, showing gratitude, social activities and doing new things in life (Jackson, 2014).



About the writer

Cathy Brown
MSc, MBA

Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and author. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

She works as a transition coach and a career counsellor with individuals and teams. She is also a guest lecturer at Nottingham University Business School. In addition, Cathy is a founding trustee of the Evolve Transition Trust, which supports disadvantaged people through life transitions.