

Re-defining Resilience

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What is resilience? Let's break down the misconceptions, get to the heart of what resilience truly is, and learn some tips on how to build resilience.

Misconception: Some people are inherently resilient and can deal with heightened stressors without an emotional reaction.

Truth: Resilience is the ability to *bounce back* from stressful situations. This does not mean that you are not impacted by stress. Instead, being "resilient" means that individuals allow themselves to acknowledge and process their emotions in a healthy way which enables them to move forward efficiently. Think of resilience like credit card debt: If we don't pay off debt as it accumulates, we're going to pay later – PLUS interest. Similarly, if emotional needs aren't addressed along the way, the cost will be much greater down the road.

Misconception: Those who are resilient can draw on their resilience *whenever* needed.

Truth: Resilience is a skill. Just like playing piano, one must *practice* healthy coping skills to maintain the ability to be resilient. We can get "rusty". We may be more-or-less resilient at times and need more-or-less time to bounce back from the stress.

Misconception: When someone expresses distress, it is always helpful to remind them of how resilient they are.

Truth: While encouragement from peers and loved ones about strengths and success can help an individual cope, responding to someone's expressed concerns by saying something like, "*You will get through this because you're resilient*", can also be invalidating, even if it is meant to be supportive. This can potentially leave a person feeling alone and unheard. Acknowledging a person's feelings by letting them know that you hear them and *understand* how they might feel can be a helpful way to address their concerns.

How to build emotional resilience

Going back to our credit card analogy, increasing our emotional resilience is similar to increasing the amount of money in our savings, for example, by putting more money in the bank or choosing to only spend on things that are most important to us. Here are some techniques that can help increase personal resources and improve the ability to handle future stressors:

1. **Set personal boundaries.** Boundaries are simply the line between what is, and is not okay for any individual, and these boundaries can change over time. The key message here is that it is okay to express and honour your needs.

2. **Embrace self-reflection.** When was the last time you asked yourself: *“how am I feeling?”* Self-reflection is a key attitude in self-care, it allows us to set personal boundaries (by identifying what our needs are) and creates the opportunity for us to process our emotions and care for our emotional needs *while* establishing a boundary between work and home, helping us to ‘leave work at work.’
3. **Practice gratitude.** Increasing focus on gratitude and appreciation is correlated with numerous health benefits, but it is easy to forget, or fail to acknowledge, the positive moments in life. It takes *practice* to get accustomed to appreciating the little things, and to feel the positive impact that gratitude can have. Here are some ways to practice gratitude: Try jotting down three things that you are grateful for every day, create a mental list of the things that made you smile (consider doing so while leaving work or brushing your teeth to build into your daily routine), or each day, tell someone what you appreciate about them.
4. **Cultivate personal interests and relationships outside of work.** This may not be as simple as it sounds. Sometimes, we may feel too exhausted to do anything after work. This is a valid and significant barrier to practicing self-care and/or doing the things that make us happy. Re-framing the way we look at activities can help overcome these barriers. Daily activities can be generally divided into two categories: those that *nourish* us (leaving us feeling more energized or rejuvenated) and those that *deplete* us (using up our energy). The next time you feel too tired for something that you want to do, try asking yourself, *“Will this leave me feeling more energized?”* If the answer is yes, try to muster up whatever energy you have in your resources, because focusing on nourishing activities and relationships can help build our energy reserves, and allow us to enjoy our days more!
5. **Accept uncertainty and relinquish control.** It is natural to want to prepare for any possible situation, and to focus on problem-based coping (or addressing the issue at hand). Unfortunately, this is not always possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced countless uncertainties in our lives. Of course, in some ways we must anticipate what may come and prepare ourselves for it, but in many circumstances, there is simply no way to prepare or address what might happen in the future until that day comes. Reminding ourselves that *“I do not know what will happen, and there is nothing I can do to change or prepare for it”* and leaving problems for our future-selves to deal with, can be liberating.
6. **Practice self-compassion.** Let’s try treating ourselves with the kindness and compassion that we show to the other people in our lives! Praise, gratitude, and encouragement do not need to come from external sources – we can all take the opportunity to show ourselves some love. Consider leaving notes of encouragement or praise for yourself in places you will see it throughout the day or set alerts on your phone. Or, the next time you are feeling down, remind

yourself that it is okay not to always feel okay, that you are just human, and that all you can do is try your best.

It is important to remember that what works for one person may not work for another. Consider trying the techniques listed here, but if they do not resonate with you, don't give up! Talk to your colleagues, friends or family about how they maintain their resilience. Look into organizational resources or do a quick online search. There are many ways that we can work to increase resilience and overall emotional wellbeing to manage these difficult times – you just need to find what works for you!

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