

Lisa Lorden Myers

Resilience: Bouncing Back In The Face Of Adversity

*“Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless in facing them.
Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain, but for the heart to conquer it.”*

— Rabindranath Tagore

Why do some people seem to bounce back from hard times while others falter or even fall apart? Those who deal best with trials and troubles have a quality that neuroscientists, psychologists, and business experts alike call “resilience.” According to Merriam-Webster, resilience is “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Resilient people are able to rebound and maintain a sense of well-being despite adversity, loss, or chaos. In contrast, those who are less resilient tend to feel victimized and overwhelmed by problems. In more severe cases, they may resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse or develop mental health problems such as clinical depression.

Resilience, or “hardiness” as it is sometimes referred to, has become a buzzword in the media in recent years. In a 2002 article in *Harvard Business Review*, Diane Coutu reported the emergence of resilience as a hot topic in the business world. There is now a variety of organizations that provide resilience training for individuals and groups, helping them to successfully navigate change and be more effective in the workplace and in their personal lives.

Interest in resilience isn’t limited to the business field. The concept also becomes relevant during times of extreme stress or adversity. In the aftermath of tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina and the events of September 11, 2001, Americans were described as a “resilient people.” Indeed, our world today is full of misfortune and heartbreak, from terrorism and war to poverty and natural disaster. As a result, understanding the nature of human resilience is more relevant than ever before. It is a particularly important concept for those who live with fibromyalgia—or the life-changing challenges of any chronic illness—on a daily basis.

The body of research on resilience goes back to the 1960s when Norman Garnezy, Ph.D., pioneered

the first studies of resilience in the children of mentally ill mothers. Since then, resilience has been investigated in a wide variety of contexts, from inner-city youth to Holocaust survivors.

Nevertheless, little scientific research has been conducted on the concept of resilience in people with chronic pain and illness. One recent study by Karoly and Ruehlman (2006) explored how resilience might correlate with other key factors in the experience of people with chronic pain. In the first stage of the study, the researchers identified two groups from a sample of 2,407 people with chronic pain, a “resilient” and “non-resilient” group. Comparisons revealed that although the two groups seemed to have equivalent levels of pain severity, the resilient group fared better in a number of areas, including coping style, catastrophizing tendencies, and perceived level of disability and emotional burden. The researchers also found that the use of prescription medications was greater in the non-resilient group, though there was no significant difference in the use of over-the-counter medications.

While statistically significant, these results don’t seem particularly ground-breaking. It is not surprising that resilience might have a positive impact on many of the aspects of living with chronic pain. Perhaps a more important question is whether resilience is learned or something with which an individual is born.

Is Resilience In the Genes?

Early theories of resilience tend to emphasize genetics and assert that some people are biologically predisposed to be more resilient. Such models often describe resilience as a trait that is inherent in certain people—a combination of body chemistry and personality characteristics that determine individuals’ responses to stress. In fact, scientists

now suspect that the 5HTT gene, which is reported to influence serotonin function in the brain, may play a role. People with this gene may have a genetic advantage that helps them bounce back better in response to stress and hardship.

Richard Davidson, Ph.D., professor and director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, believes that some people's brains may actually be wired with the capacity to maintain high levels of well-being in the face of adversity. The difference may involve patterns of activation in the prefrontal cortex, a particular area of the brain often involved in regulating emotions. However, Davidson cautions that just because biological differences in resilient and non-resilient people can be found, it doesn't necessarily mean that the distinction is one that is genetic. "Modern neuroscience research teaches us that the brain is an organ built to change in response to experience, probably more than any other organ in the body," says Davidson, "...so while early differences in these patterns of brain function have been detected, we and others have also found remarkable plasticity or change that can occur."

In fact, much of the literature suggests that environment also plays a role in the development of resilience. Frederic Flach, M.D., a well-known voice in the field and author of *Resilience: Discovering a New Strength at Times of Stress*, proposed a two-stage process that involves an extreme change or disruption (usually accompanied by emotional pain) and a reintegration, or "putting the pieces of our world back together but into a new, stronger, wider-based structure." Flach explains that resilience is the array of personal strengths necessary to meet ongoing cycles of disruption and adaptation throughout our lives. Says Flach, "resilience is a strength most of us can develop with thought and practice."

Robert Brooks, Ph.D., and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., authors of *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, have also proposed a process-oriented model of resilience. They argue that resilient people have certain attitudes and beliefs that influence their behaviors and the skills they develop, which in turn reinforce those attitudes and beliefs. The authors term this process a "resilient mindset."

Building Blocks of Resilience

While there is no consensus in the literature regarding the mechanism of resilience, most theories

have a great deal of overlap in the qualities and distinguishing characteristics they identify as being typical of resilient people. Resilience is said to be comprised of a variety of factors, such as:

- the ability to manage strong emotions
- an optimistic outlook (along with an acceptance of reality, rather than engaging in denial)
- positive relationships and the ability to enlist others' help
- the tendency to focus on what one can control in life and a sense of ownership and responsibility for one's actions
- interpersonal and communication skills
- strong values and beliefs
- sense of humor
- flexibility and an ability to be creative in solving problems
- a strong sense of self and confidence in one's strengths and abilities
- the capacity to set realistic goals and expectations and take steps to carry them out

Flach points out that a person's level of resilience will fluctuate over time. He writes, "No one particular resilient attribute is a static ingredient of our personalities. Sometimes, for example, we are more courageous than at others." Some people may be strong in certain characteristics of resilience while weak on others. Argues Flach, "What is important is to understand our strengths and limitations and work to develop those attributes that are factors in resilience."

The Search for Meaning

In addition to the above-mentioned skills and characteristics, most experts agree that one of the most essential components of resilience is the ability to find meaning in life, and often in one's suffering. We all have encountered people who see themselves as victims of whatever befalls them in life and seem to find no value in living through difficult times. Resilient people, in contrast, have the ability to find meaning in their suffering, and in so doing they can create a better future.

Victor E. Frankl, an internationally renowned psychiatrist and author of the celebrated book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pioneered a psychotherapy

Ten Ways To Build Resilience

Make connections. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people find that being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations, or other local groups provides social support and can help with reclaiming hope. Assisting others in their time of need also can benefit the helper.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems. You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.

Accept that change is a part of living. Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

Move toward your goals. Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly—even if it seems like a small accomplishment—that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, “What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”

Take decisive actions. Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect

as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.

Nurture a positive view of yourself. Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context, and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.

Maintain a hopeful outlook. An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

Additional ways of strengthening resilience may be helpful. For example, some people write about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to trauma or other stressful events in their life. Meditation and spiritual practices help some people build connections and restore hope.

The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you as part of your own personal strategy for fostering resilience.

Source: American Psychological Association

technique called “logotherapy” based on his own experiences in Nazi concentration camps. Logotherapy is literally translated as *therapy through meaning* and emphasizes human beings' search for meaning in the face of suffering. Perhaps no one is a better model than Frankl of human resilience and the will to find meaning in even the most unspeakable suffering.

In fact, Frankl's book is one of the most influential works in the psychology literature, and much of what is called “resilience training” today is based on Frankl's theory, teaching people to construct meaning in their lives. Frankl recalls the men in the concentration camps “who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.” He wrote, “they offer sufficient proof that

everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way...”

Frankl’s work teaches us that we can find meaning in life even as we confront problems like chronic illness that don’t have ultimate solutions—that is, “when facing a fate that cannot be changed.” This is also the message of resilience theory in general. Being resilient doesn’t mean that one is hardened against stress or does not experience anguish and despair. Rather, a resilient person learns to bend without breaking and finds the strength to adapt to new challenges.

Becoming Resilient: What You Can Do

In her *Harvard Business Review* article, Coudu called resilience “one of the great puzzles of human nature, like creativity or the religious instinct.” Indeed, a recurring theme in the literature is that resilience is complex. According to Brooks and Goldstein, it is not something that can be discovered or attained like a “fountain of youth.” They emphasize that the process of building and maintaining the characteristics of resilience requires ongoing dedication. The authors point out, however, that these characteristics are tangible and within reach. “The more you are aware of the features that nurture resilience...the better prepared you will be to promote resilience and stress hardiness in yourself.”

Other experts agree. The American Psychological Association (APA) offers a publication on the topic of resilience, which states, “Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.” (See sidebar.)

Joanna Wasmuth, founder of Harmony Coaching Group and a fibromyalgia sufferer, is a speaker, author, and life coach who teaches people to thrive in spite of chronic pain. “I have learned the anatomy

of a comeback,” she said in a recent interview, “over and over and over.” Wasmuth emphasized that resilience is something that can be learned. “I think of resilience as a muscle,” she said. “When you go to work out, it hurts the first couple of times, and you can’t really do that much with it. But as you work out more and more, it gets stronger and stronger.”

Davidson explains that one way people can “train the brain” to be more resilient is through the use of meditation. His research focuses on neuroplasticity, the capacity of the brain to develop and change throughout life. He became best known for his work demonstrating meditation’s direct impact on the structure and function of the brain. Says Davidson, “Meditation probably doesn’t calm emotions per se but is likely to facilitate more rapid recovery following a negative event.” In one study (Davidson et al., 2003), 25 subjects were enrolled in an eight-week meditation training program and compared to a control group. Measurements of electrical activity in the brains of both groups revealed increased activation in the brains of the meditation group, in the area of the brain typically associated with positive affect and resilience. Says Davidson, “These are individuals who, when adversity occurs, will recover more quickly.”

More research is needed to fully understand how all the facets of resilience come together. Coudu noted that resilient people often don’t seem to have an awareness of this quality in themselves. “Resilience is a reflex,” she writes, “a way of facing and understanding the world that is deeply etched into a person’s mind and soul.”

No matter how resilience is defined or the exact mechanism by which it works, it is probably safe to say that we recognize it when we see it. Perhaps the poet Jane Hirshfield described the concept of resilience in the most eloquent and poignant way of all, in her poem entitled “Optimism”:

More and more I have come to admire resilience.
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,
it turns in another...

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Additional Resources

- The Power of Resilience* – Robert Brooks, Ph.D., and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.
McGraw-Hill (2004)
- Resilience: Discovering a New Strength at Times of Stress* – Frederic Flach, M.D.
Hatherleigh Press (2003)
- The Road to Resilience* (American Psychological Association)
<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=6>
- Resilience: Build Skills to endure hardship* (Mayo Clinic) <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078>
- Emotional Resilience* (Mental Help Net)
http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/center_index.php?id=298&cn=298