

Resilience – what is it?

We've all heard the term 'resilience' and we know intuitively that having resilience is a good thing. But what does resilience really mean? How do you know if you're resilient and more importantly, is it possible to become more resilient?

Being resilient or having resilience can be described in many different ways. For instance:

- Coping well with stressful situations
- Behaving in a relatively consistent way even when experiencing difficult, challenging or trying circumstances
- Being adaptable
- Resourcefulness
- Being a good problem-solver
- Coping with change, or possible change, in a positive way
- Adjusting to new situations well
- Being able to 'process' or cope with distressing events and the emotional arousal that accompanies them
- Recovering from setbacks that may occur throughout life
- 'Bouncing back' after an unexpected and/or negative event
- Feeling capable and self-reliant
- Reacting to situations with a learning/coping reaction instead of a victim/blaming reaction

It's important to note that being resilient does not mean showing no emotion or carrying on as normal when your life is in chaos. Indeed, behaving as though nothing is wrong when this is not the case is not a healthy way to cope with the reality of a situation. Mental health experts acknowledge that everyone needs time to process or understand events and come to grips with what has happened or what is happening. At some point, however, people who are defined as being more resilient than others seem to recover from this stage and are able to return to their lives in a meaningful and positive way.

What happens when we don't cope?

Being emotionally or psychologically resilient is a desirable characteristic, but just what does it mean in terms of how we cope or manage when times are tough? For some people who don't have good coping skills, or who are faced with particularly difficult problems, losses, stresses or distressing incidents, the impact on the quality of their life can be significant.

It has been found that people who are less resilient than others are more likely to:

- Use alcohol, cigarettes and drugs

- Experience depressive episodes that may lead to a depression disorder
- Feel overly stressed and unable to cope
- Feel anxious and this may lead to suffering anxiety disorders
- Display anti-social behaviours including outbursts of inappropriate anger and aggression
- Experience relationship difficulties and/or break-ups
- Require increased levels of assistance from others when faced with challenging, stressful, traumatic or difficult situations
- Feel lonely and often shut themselves off from family and friends
- Become violent
- Be at risk of suicide

Coping with life in a better way

The good news is that just as physical fitness can be improved, so can your emotional resilience.

There is a great deal of evidence based research that shows there are a number of factors that may promote resilience. These include:

- The ability to cope with stress effectively and in a healthy manner
- Having good problem-solving skills
- Seeking help when it is needed
- Holding the belief that you can manage your feelings and cope
- Having social support
- Being connected with others, such as family or friends
- Talking to loved ones about the distressing experiences or problems
- Spirituality
- Identifying yourself as a survivor, not a victim
- Helping others
- Finding positive meaning in difficult or distressing situations

Other factors that have been associated with being resilient include:

- Having strong intergenerational bonds
- Feeling proud of yourself, your family and social/ethnic group
- Having some non-material goals
- Feeling 'connected' – having strong family connections and engaging with the community
- Placing emphasis on a positive contribution within a family unit (for example, doing 'chores' simply to make things easier for your partner or family members)
- Developing a sense of belonging and involvement within your community through sporting groups or other community based organisations
- Having a sense of 'ownership' over your life, goals and accomplishments
- Being optimistic

Just as improving your fitness takes a real effort and commitment, becoming a more resilient person will also take some work.

Read through the list above and find some things that you feel you could do – perhaps it's making an effort to become more involved in the community or making a conscious effort to change from a 'glass half empty' person to a 'glass half full' person, or maybe it's setting some different goals for yourself that are more about personal happiness instead of spending too much time watching that widescreen TV or playing computer games.

Perhaps, though, you need to approach the way you deal with crises or problems a little differently. [Lifeline Australia](#) suggests that everyone remember the following points during distressing, difficult or trying times:

- Feeling stressed and emotional during a crisis is normal, so be kind to yourself and others
- Be patient, take regular emotional breaks, switch off the news and take it easy for a short time. This will help you maintain your capacity to cope
- Don't push yourself or others around you too hard
- Reduce short term expectations, don't criticise others' reactions, and realise that people cope with events differently
- Ensure your physical wellbeing is looked after – eat, drink and rest as best as you can
- Realise that even if you are not directly affected by what's going on, the event may still have an impact on your mental and emotional health and wellbeing
- Understand that you are not alone, that you can always find caring support from organisations like Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Being resilient doesn't mean you shouldn't display emotion or that you won't have times when you feel like things are tough. But if you feel like things are getting too much for you or you are worried you can't cope with everything life is throwing at you, then don't be afraid to ask for help. Call on friends, family and even trusted work colleagues for practical and emotional support. There may be times when speaking to a professional like a psychologist can not only help you to cope with the problems you may be facing now, but also those you're sure to come up against in future.

Terry Kirkpatrick,
Manager Mental Health Association
Sydney North Sub-branch Secretary