

TIPS ON BUILDING RESILIENCY

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Resiliency is the ability to bounce back quickly from adversity and stay in a relatively peaceful, calm state of being where you are balanced and grounded; able to react reasonably and appropriately to what is going on in your life. With resilience you are not quickly triggered out of your calm state and can handle challenges with fresh, expansive and creative approaches.

Building resiliency requires that you manage your stress in healthy ways, by minimizing stressors, healing from stressful events and changing your relationship to adversity. By incorporating consistent practices into your life that are fun and make you feel happy you will build resilience to stress. These practices can be sensual, social or spiritual activities. They can be physical or mental. You can allocate special time to do these activities outside of your daily routines and/or incorporate them into your routines. The point is, the more time you spend in joyful, expansive states of being the more you bias your body and mind in favour of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual resiliency.

With building resilience comes an emphasis on strengthening your internal resources. **While there's nothing wrong with experiencing pleasure from external sources, and these activities can definitely be fun, research increasingly shows they are not the most effective forms of building resiliency.** Many wisdom traditions have known this for millennia. Rather, activities that help you feel connected and provide opportunities to nurture life have deeper, more lasting benefits.

These benefits can today be measured in our biochemistry and brain activity. Examples include gardening, hosting a baby shower or singing in a choir. Volunteering at the local community centre can better build resilience than pleasure-seeking activities. Engaging in activities that are meaningful and significant to you, that align with your values and visions, will build resilience so long as you enjoy them and don't feel pressured or stressed by them.

Why develop your inner reserves rather than rely on something external to shift how you feel?

First of all you can find yourself in situations where you don't have access to external sources of pleasure because of money, location, physical ability or other circumstances.

Secondly, external delights can feel irrelevant or empty if you don't have the internal reserves to enjoy them. For instance, have you ever seen someone vacationing in a beautiful natural environment but still unhappy? Their thoughts remain stuck in their day-to-day dramas. Or maybe they complain about the bugs, heat or lack of convenience. Meanwhile others in the exact same environment joyfully experience the moment, their daily stresses forgotten. Clearly resilience in this case is an inside job.

Below are a variety of simple practices you can incorporate into your life to build your internal reserves. Clearly this is not a comprehensive list of practices but they are simple actions that go a long way toward supporting resilience. If you already have practices that work for you, the suggestions below will compliment what you're already doing. **Consciously and intentionally focusing on what lifts your spirits, and noting how it is impacting you, will enhance the beneficial effects of any activity.**

There are two sets of tips below: One set offers you some ideas on daily practices. You can choose one, all or any combination of these practices. They are all powerful according to new science as well as many wisdom traditions.

The remaining tips are ideas and approaches you can infuse into your daily activities to minimize, avoid or manage stressful situations.

Practices

1. **Make Resilience a Priority:** You probably know many ways to build your resilience but they are useless to you if you don't practice them regularly. Building resilience needs to be a priority if you want to enjoy the benefits. Remember that you have to make a decision; it isn't something anyone else can give you. It doesn't come from outside of you. It's a choice you make.
2. **Vagal Breathing:** 5-7 minutes a day will lower your cortisol and adrenaline levels. Also, breathing after a stressful event will reset your body's state to one of relaxation. The simplest practice is to breathe slowly and make your exhale long and leisurely; about twice as long as your inhale.
3. **Journal To Uplift Yourself:** Many people who do this say it has changed their lives because it shifts their outlook on reality. The body doesn't distinguish between what's really going on from what you focus your attention on. Whether you are laying on the beach, remembering or imagining it, your body reacts the same. Allocate the time. Take your journal with you wherever you go. Journaling can build resilience and help you cope with pop up stresses in the moment.

According to the Institute of HeartMath, focusing on expansive emotions for 5 minutes results in 5 hours of heightened immunity, accelerated healing & expanded mental capacities including problem solving, clarity and creativity. Studies show that intentionally cultivating expansive thoughts correlates with a longer, healthier life. In general, journaling reinforces the effect of the feelings in your brain, strengthening communication pathways and brain infrastructure in favour of the emotional state you are cultivating.

The key to building resilience through journaling is to cultivate expansive emotions. Journal about what feels good, what makes you happy and evokes a sense of fun. Here are some journal ideas:

- **Gratitude:** Don't just do a shopping list. Write about why you're grateful, to whom and for what. Stay in the mindset for a while, notice how gratitude feels in your body. Notice that you're noticing and that this is healthy for you. Grow, savor and dwell on the feeling.
- **Self-Compliments:** Give yourself 3 compliments a day. Stay away from physical attributes or material possessions. Don't repeat your compliments. Make them different every day.
- Keep a journal to write about or draw your **vision and goals**. Describe your ideal world or your ideal future life. Research shows people who do this are more likely to achieve their goals.
- Keep a **fantasy** journal where you let your imagination run wild.
- Pick **fond memories** and journal about them.
- **Inspirational quotes.** Collect them and write about them.
- **Positive Aspects:** Take an experience, situation, person or thing that you don't feel good about and journal about the positive aspects. There might be a gift or two in the experience, even if it's not something you want to repeat. That controlling person might be challenging you to grow. That boring job may be motivating you to take an action you

wouldn't otherwise. Making meaning out of difficulties and challenges can help you build resilience.

4. **Quiet Time:** spend time being quiet and still every day.
 - Turn your attention inward and focus on some aspect of your body like your breath or heartbeat or ...
 - Focus on something in nature (stone, shell, feather, plant) and give it your full attention, using your senses to appreciate and connect with the object or ...
 - Try mindfulness meditation. People who have a mindfulness practice tend to be happier and healthier according to many indicators.
 - Mindfulness is about observing thoughts, feelings and or bodily responses to your thoughts and feelings as if you were an outsider - without judgment or criticism. Just let it be.
 - A mere 5 minutes of stillness a day can catalyze a dramatic shift in your mindset and wellbeing.
5. **Emotional Scans:** This practice will train you to be more aware of your emotions as they come and go.
 - Every morning and evening take a few minutes to turn your attention to your body. Notice how your feelings, whatever they are, show up in the body. Every thought you have evokes a feeling; every feeling has a corresponding reaction in the body.
 - Name the emotion causing that sensation in your body. Explore it. Describe how it feels. What is the sensation like? Does it move around? Does it ebb and flow; rise and fall? Does it intensify or lose intensity when you observe it?
 - Let the unpleasant emotions be for now. You can switch your attention later. Just explore whatever comes up for now.
 - Stay out of your head. You don't need to story what you feel, rationalize, explain, justify or excuse. Just FEEL.
6. **Spend Time in Nature or Surround Yourself With Nature:** Even fake nature (photos, art objects, sounds) or imagining/fantasizing about nature can reverse stress and promote wellness. Studies increasingly note that there are countless ways in which nature promotes wellbeing at the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels.
7. **Read Inspirational Materials:** Buy books, read articles, subscribe to quotes. Whatever works for you and lifts your spirits.
8. **Volunteer:** It heightens immunity, accelerates healing & expands mental capacities including problem solving, clarity and creativity. Studies show people who volunteer live longer, healthier lives. Volunteering makes goal achievement more likely and it doesn't need to take that much time out of your life. A couple hours a month is more than sufficient if you find the experience pleasurable and meaningful.
9. **Make Music or Art:** If you enjoy art and create with a (self) compassionate spirit you will enjoy heightened immunity, accelerated healing & expanded mental capacities including problem

solving, memory, learning and creativity. Also, the more you exercise your creative capacities the stronger they become.

10. Exercise and Eat Nutritious Foods in Healthy Amounts: This technique for building resiliency is well known and shouldn't need much explanation. If you want details you'll find many institutional websites and publications to consult. There is also plenty of information on herbs and spices that will help you deal with the symptoms of stress.

General Tips

11. **Commit To Your Own Happiness:** Decide that you deserve to be happy. You don't have to earn it. You are already worthy and deserving. Learn to love and accept yourself unconditionally. Forgive yourself if you feel you need to.
 - Acknowledge that everyone you connect to benefits from your joy in tangible and intangible ways.
 - Understand what makes you happy (it's probably not material things) and grow it in your life.
 - Follow your passions. Every. Single. Day. As long as you can. As often as you can. No apologies, excuses or explanations. Just passion.
 - Understand that happiness isn't a permanent state of being but an underlying feeling about life.
12. **Offer Compassion:** Compassion enhances feelings of your connectedness to other living beings, which changes your brain and your biochemistry toward physical health and improved mental capacity. Compassionate words and actions alleviate suffering in others. The action you take can be small or large, do whatever is in your capacity. A mere smile has great potential to brighten someone's day. Be mindful of your capacity or you'll burn out. Stay open to the messages your body sends.
13. **Practice Self-Compassion:** Don't forget to be self-compassionate. Treat yourself with the same kindness, understanding and forgiveness you offer others. Studies show that self-compassionate people are less likely to burn out or suffer from compassion fatigue. Rather than seeing your situation as unique, think about how your situation helps you connect to others. Assign meaning to difficult or challenging experiences.
14. **Reframe:** If you generally frame your work or interests in contractive ways switch it up to be more expansive. For instance, instead of an emphasis on losing weight put the emphasis on being healthy. Rather than describe your work as anti-something reframe it around what you're pro. Anti-oppressive work can be called social justice work, for instance. Centralize the positive vision rather than what you don't want in the world. A more expansive framing of your goals and vision looks different in your brain and facilitates your ability to achieve what you're working for and feel better about the journey.
15. **Define and Describe Yourself in Empowering Ways:** While genuine humility is helpful, it isn't helpful to criticize and judge yourself, publically or privately. You are your story so make it a great one. Use empowering words to describe yourself and your choices, even when talking to yourself. If the situation is appropriate say "won't" instead of "can't"; "I will" instead of "I should"; "I choose to" rather than "I have to". Belief can follow the talk. Fake it till you make it.

16. **Smile.** Find excuses to smile. Smiling:

- Counters the stress reaction
- Calms the heart
- Boosts immunity
- Lowers blood pressure
- Oxygenates the blood
- Improves memory, learning, alertness, creativity
- Increases endorphin, serotonin and dopamine levels
- Lifts the spirits of those who receive your smile.

17. **Laugh:** You get all the benefits of smiling plus it's good for your abdominals. Laughing with others generates a sense of connection.

18. **Distinguish between sensual pleasure and internal fulfillment:** It's common to confuse what's pleasurable in the moment with what sustains long-term joy. Pleasure tends to be about engaging the senses in something that feels good. That's ok so long as you recognize that your pleasure is 1) dependent on the presence of something external to you and 2) short-lived. The causes of a joyful temperament are more likely to be based in your approach to life and relationships, including your relationship with yourself.

19. **Commit to Your Own Spiritual Development:** Strive to be a better person – whatever that means to you. Be self-loving. The more love you have for yourself the more you will have for others. Choose to be around people who inspire you to become better. Role model what you consider to be honourable behavior. Make it fun and inspiring rather than a struggle requiring effort.

20. **Minimize Your Exposure to Negativity:** Yes, you need to know what's going on in the world and be there for people who are in distress but you don't have to immerse yourself in despair 24/7. Ask yourself if there is a good reason to listen to the same unhappy story over and over. If there is no new information coming in, cut it off. (Turn off the TV, close Facebook, walk away from the conversation, change the subject, etc.)

Reframe sad, frustrating, fear-generating stories so that they inspire, motivate and offer hope. Notice if you are caught up in the energy of a negative story and do something about it. Immerse yourself in positive, optimistic stories - real or fictional. Assign meaning to contractive stories and do your best to move past them.

21. **Gift and Share:** Do it with a light and loving heart without any sense of obligation or expectation. Gifting and sharing increases levels of health-promoting biochemicals in your body; reverses the stress reaction; and strengthens relationships.

22. **Learn how to receive graciously:** Giving and receiving need to be in balance. It is a cycle that needs to stay in process. Over-giving leads to resentment and exhaustion. Receiving enables another to benefit from the experience of giving. Receiving gives you the opportunity to practice feeling that you are deserving and worthy.

23. **Give Up Arguing**

- Understand the difference between arguing and discussing.
- Process the feelings behind your opinions, decisions and attitudes.
- Possible alternatives to arguing:

- Ask questions designed to help people work things out for themselves.
- Share your feelings rather than thoughts. People make decisions with their hearts, not their brains.
- Decide if anything you say is likely to shift the person's mindset. If not, walk away and save yourself the grief. There are others who will be open to discussion.
- Agree to disagree.
- Ask yourself: do you need to be right or do you want to be happy?

24. Get a Pet: If you can afford and enjoy animals, get one. Studies say people with pets are healthier & live longer.

- Pets lower your blood pressure, lessen your anxiety and boost your immunity.
- Assuming you're not afraid, merely petting a cat or dog slows the heart rate, counters the stress reaction, and elevates dopamine and serotonin levels (mood stabilizers) while lowering triglyceride and cholesterol ("bad" fat) levels.
- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression and are more likely to recover from or live longer after serious events like stroke and heart attack.
- People who own pets make less frequent doctor and hospital visits and enjoy better overall health.
- Contrary to previous beliefs, children raised in homes with pets are at less risk of allergies, asthma and eczema.
- Pets offer you opportunities to give and share every day.
- Pets give you many opportunities to laugh throughout the day.

25. Slow Down and Focus: Fight your instinct to speed up and multitask when under pressure. Take frequent breaks. Doing things slowly and mindfully increases your enjoyment and improves productivity while minimizing mistakes. Multitasking looks like stress in the brain and decreases your enjoyment of what you're doing. It also impedes your wellbeing. Prioritize according to what is most meaningful to you rather than the urgent/important formula most time management experts use. Allocate more time to the things that create value or matter most to you. Schedule these tasks first. Then turn your attention to the rest.

In sum, the most effective and lasting practices for building resiliency are those that:

- 1. Strengthen your inner reserves.**
- 2. Cultivate your connectedness to other people and life forms.**
- 3. Contribute to honourable social change.**