

Executive Resilience

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What is Resilience?

You may have noticed that some people are born strong. They flow with difficulties and recover fast. Nothing can beat their spirit or love of life. They won the resilience lottery. The rest of us take time to find and develop that strength – that some call resilience.

Resilience is your capacity to handle difficulties with courage, skill, and grace; the core strength you use to lift the load of life. To more formally and completely define: resilience is your ability to withstand adversity (Resist), bounce back from adversity (Recover), and grow despite life's downturns (Rise). A few well-known definitions offered by psychologists are:

- The personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity.¹
- Positive patterns of adaptation in the context of adversity.²
- The positive pole of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity.³

The purpose of developing personal resilience is not to close eyes to reality, downplay the inefficiencies in the system, and become a doormat. It is to preserve the vigor and courage, so you lead as a change agent, and not sulk as a burnt-out sufferer. Every leader of the past and present, who withstood challenges and changed his or her world instead of passively suffering, was (and is) resilient. That's the case for cultivating greater resilience.

Interestingly, resilience is needed, not only for catastrophes, but also for common daily challenges. In fact, resilience is more often needed for the latter. Let's explore some of the research in this area.

Are We Resilient or Vulnerable or Both?

Seventy-five percent of us don't have diagnosed mental health issues.⁴ Only a minority of those exposed to significant traumatic events develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);^{5-7 8} The commonest outcome after deployment is low stress or resilience and not psychopathology (80 percent)⁹ In other words we are resilient. But is that the total story?

Over 80 percent of workers experience excessive stress on the job. Majority of us (about 70 percent) are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work. Anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of health care professionals, journalists, attorneys and others feel burnout. Over 60 percent of us experience discrimination such as feeling threatened or harassed, or receiving less than courteous service. Half of us feel lonely. The leading cause of disability globally now is depression, affecting over 320 million people. Presently, our suicide rate is the highest it has been in three decades, with approximately 117 citizens taking their life every day in the U.S. That is 42,000 people in a year.

So, the answer is – we are both resilient and vulnerable. We are much more skilled in dealing with crises, then we are in living a fulfilled life. Happiness eludes us, as does job satisfaction, and

warm enduring deep relationships. We struggle with finding meaning, stopping an argument midway, or controlling our urges. It is in this domain – dealing with the daily struggles of work, nurturing relationships, experiencing greater happiness, and finding deeper meaning – that we particularly need to grow.

An increasing realization among researchers isn't that one is resilient or not, but it is asking, in what domain/s is a person resilient? Some of us faint on seeing a spider, others take up the job of being a bugman. Some can't handle the sight of blood, others become surgeons. So, it is fair to assume that we all are uniquely resilient. A good team leverages the unique resilience of its members to create excellence.

Resilience Research

Resilience comes from Latin *resalire*, which means to bounce back or jump again. This word was embraced by ecological scientists to describe biological systems that better withstand and bounce back from the threats they face. For example, the coral reef colonies that survive bleaching are the ones that are most resilient.

Psychology then embraced resilience, particularly among children, reporting on children who thrive despite growing up in severely adverse circumstances, including poverty and community violence,^{10,11} tragic experiences,¹²⁻¹⁴ chronic illness,¹⁵ and maltreatment.¹⁶

Resilience in adults was first studied as a follow up to the childhood research, by following vulnerable children in adulthood. The unfortunate events of September 11th, 2001 and the wars that followed, changed everything. Remarkable examples of resilience and vulnerability were seen, as well as predictors for both the outcomes, by researchers, journalists and ordinary citizens. The research was then expanded to other challenges such as traumatic injury, loss of spouse or partner, military deployment, medical procedures etc.

Resilience research is now expanding to include chronic daily stressors – that of medical conditions, relationships, caregiving, and of course, work. This research identifies four domains of resilience:

- Physical (maintaining health and wellbeing)
- Cognitive (maintaining attending, judgment and decision making amidst stress)
- Emotional (experiencing positive emotions and recovering quickly from negative emotions), and
- Spiritual (having a strong sense of meaning and purpose).

Other domains including social, financial, and occupational are also being recognized. Investigators are also looking at resiliency genes, gene environment interactions, and neuro-endocrine markers of resilience – details that are beyond the scope of this short review.

Why Resilience?

Why should individuals, teams, and organizations strive to be resilient? The answer is obvious but it will be good to remind us here about the four core benefits of resilience.

#1. The opposite pole of resilience is stagnation, or worse, losing out. Growing because of adversity isn't an option in today's world; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.

#2. Decreasing the load is seldom an option. I haven't heard a CEO saying let's do less for more. Targets will keep rising, as will the competition. Enhancing resilience is truly the unexplored or under-explored low-hanging fruit.

#3. Resilience correlates with better physical, emotional, social, and occupational wellbeing in hundreds of studies.

#4. Enhancing resilience improves physical, emotional and social wellbeing, enhances work performance, and decreases healthcare costs.

Enhancing Resilience

Majority of the executives consider themselves and their relationships as the core source of resilience, and not their organization. Further, the greatest drain on resilience are workplace conflicts, demand-resource imbalance, personal criticism, and relationship challenges.¹⁷ Recall that we need the greatest resilience for daily struggles at work, developing nurturing relationships, experiencing greater happiness, and finding deeper meaning. Hence, the resilience program we offer is more relationship-centric, focused on emotional intelligence, and provides a pragmatic construct to better handle daily life challenges.

Presently, several resilience programs have been developed, but the majority lack a sound model as its basis, an engaging approach, scalability, and research evidence. We have carefully considered all of these to develop a pragmatic approach toward resilience, anchoring our work in neuroscience.

You can experience the program [online](#), or consider a [keynote](#), one of the [SMART workshops](#), or full-scale immersion in the [Transform course](#). You can also become a [trainer](#) in the program.

Please contact us if you have additional questions regarding any of these options.

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