Grace under fire

Karen Ellis offers some practical advice on becoming more resilient in the modern workplace

'Resilience' has become a trendy term of late. Management literature now sets out personal resilience as an important leadership attribute as well as a factor in organisational success. But what does it really mean?

Since the mid-nineteenth century, people have linked the word with resistance to setbacks or adversity: the person as stalwart oak tree. Go back to the word's origins, though, and you'll find a different definition: "Returning to an original position; springing back, recoiling, etc."[1]

The word's root is the Latin *resilire*, which means to leap back or recoil. I'm going to use that definition (which is still used among physicists) to define resilience as the ability to bounce back from adverse events, upsets and reversals of fortune.

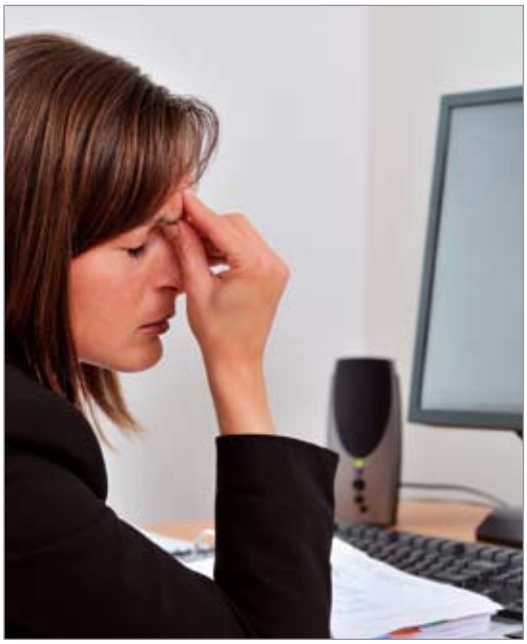
The bounce-back effect

The recent Labour leadership contest – and its aftermath – has shown us resilience in action. David Miliband hasn't just absorbed a shocking reversal of fortune with good grace, but also improved his reputation by showing eloquence, generosity and equilibrium in defeat. That's the point of resilience: keeping your head in difficult situations and making the most of the difficulty is what separates the mature leader or staff member from the rest of the pack.

Many studies of human resilience extend the concept of personal resilience beyond merely bouncing back to *improving* your bounce-back[2]. They show that about 30 per cent of people can use stressful and traumatic experiences to improve how they handle similar situations in the future[3]. So if some people are naturally resilient, what can the rest of us do?

What does resilience consist of?

True resilience includes emotional, mental and physical aspects: you need to be resilient at all three levels to create maximum 'bounce-back-ability'.



At the emotional level, you need to manage your 'arousal state' in difficult circumstances – neither becoming over-anxious or aggressive nor slumping into defeat or helplessness.

Look at the popular media: the vast majority of 'celebrity' behaviour shows what it means to lack resilience. Constant tears, rows and manufactured elation demonstrate a rollercoaster of arousal states.

At the mental level, resilience is the ability to recover your thinking capacity quickly after an 'arousal burst'. That means maintaining your mental capacity under chronic stress, to stand apart from your troubles and to take a realistically optimistic view of events.

Finally, someone who is physically resilient can manage his emotional arousal state better than someone who is not. When we're tired, unwell or even hungry, we find it harder to manage our emotions. Some people get manic, fractious or panicky, while others move into a chronic low arousal state almost like temporary depression.

Resilience at work – putting it into action

You've just been pulled into an unexpected meeting, where someone from the top of your organisation has torn strips off you over a project you've been working on. He hasn't let you reply or state your case, while your colleagues – despite looking embarrassed on your behalf – have stayed firmly in the background. After a serious dressing down, you're sent on your way to 'go and sort it out'.

Like most people, just thinking about it might have raised your pulse rate, annoyed you or made you feel upset. And how much worse would the real scenario have felt?

Being 'shamed' is one of the most negatively arousing experiences you can have. It brings your 'fight/flight' system into play, pumping adrenalin and cortisol through your body, ramping up your heart rate and blood pressure, and getting your sympathetic nervous system ready for action. But in this sort of situation, where you don't need to turn and flee or thump anyone, what's the best response?

Well, let's start with the oldest advice in the book: breathe and count to ten. There's a reason for it: we often start to breathe even more shallowly and quickly after an upsetting experience but deep, diaphragmatic breathing has a hugely calming effect on the body. So find an excuse to take yourself away – to the loo or for a walk outside – and find somewhere you can close your eyes and concentrate on breathing deeply for a few minutes. If you really draw your breath down into your abdomen (like yoga breathing), you can also 'calm' your vagal nerve (the large nerve that runs down to your stomach), which will reduce your sense of nausea or butterflies in your stomach.

Once you have found your calm state again, you can go back into the situation more able to think clearly and less likely to react emotionally.

When you have the chance to escape from work, it's good to use the following three 'second aid' strategies to get the stress hormones out of your body and ease any residual tension you might feel:

Exercise Moderate aerobic exercise like a brisk walk or cycle will clear the adrenalin and cortisol out of your blood stream and get you breathing deeply into the bargain

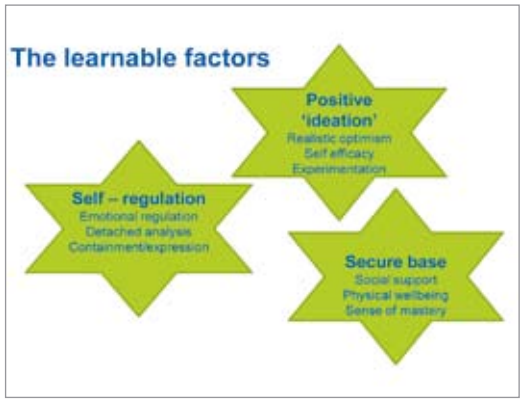
Constructive ranting Find a good friend and ask them to listen to you having a good complain about what happened, in as much detail as you can muster. They don't need to give advice or solutions, just listen, nod and make sympathetic noises! Just the once, though: going over and over a bad event will 'fix' it in your mind and deepen its effects

Be nice to yourself Have a bath, eat your favourite dinner and have a glass of wine. The sense of self-parenting can help raise our mood even if the underlying situation isn't resolved.

In terms of recovery from shock, being able to manage our breathing and free ourselves of significant muscular tension will help us cope with difficulties in the short term and lower our overall 'arousability' in the medium term.

The learnable skills of resilience

There's now a considerable research base in resilience and its learnable skills in positive psychology (the psychology of normal or high-performing individuals). While authors tend to disagree in their emphasis of the different factors, the skills they recommend fall into three groups.



Self-regulation

Emotional regulation is a massive part of managing your resilience, and the best place to start is with your body's physical state. This is something you can learn to manage both in the day-to-day turbulence of work and in long-term stress situations.

The key to self-management is the ability to change your arousal level at will. There is a whole science of arousal management but the usual suspects are all key: good nutrition, exercise, rest and the company of sympathetic others.

The second factor in this group is the capacity for detached analysis from a 'third person' perspective. People who show long-term resilience in highly stressful environments are able to do this for themselves: they can imagine being outside the situation, looking in and asking themselves sensible questions like:

- How bad is this situation in the context of my life as a whole?
- Do I need to get out of this? If so, what is my strategy for doing so?
- Can I get support from other people or form alliances to improve things?

As an executive coach, I get plenty of requests for assistance from senior people who have →

reached the end of their tether in a difficult situation. They need help to detach from the experience and hold just this kind of third person inquiry with them. Often they're so immersed that they can't see any options; either for getting away or for coping better within their position. But you don't necessarily need a coach – any sensible friend or colleague can help with your analysis as long as they can stay detached as you're talking, even if they're actually furious on your behalf

The last aspect of self-regulation is choosing to either contain or express our emotions, especially in the immediate stress situation. Interestingly, the most resilient are neither 'expressors' nor 'containers': they're the people who can make a conscious choice in the moment about whether to express their annoyance or hold it in to help deal with the situation later.

Positive ideation

I use the technical term 'ideation' to separate what really works from the rather trite concept of 'positive thinking'. Simply putting on your rose-tinted glasses and believing that everything will come right is not a resilience strategy. Watch an episode of *The X-Factor* – you'll see what I'm getting at. Truly resilient people don't just find ways through their difficulties; they also find meaning and learning from bad events, which demands specific cognitive and emotional abilities.

Truly resilient people don't just find ways through their difficulties; they also find meaning and learning

Realistic optimism is a powerful way to improve resilience – and the key word is 'realistic'. Unfounded optimism, naive belief in others and 'hoping for the best' are actively harmful – they make you more prone to regular disappointment and so less resilient in the long run. But being able to stop unhelpful 'catastrophising' in its tracks is vital: after a small mistake, can you step back, take a deep breath and judge the actual likelihood of being fired, losing your reputation or being shunned?

Talking to yourself from the third party perspective helps – reminding yourself of your talents, your track record and your ability to put things right. If you can't do this for yourself, ask a friend to do it for you: it may seem like a strange request but others are often better at being optimistic on our behalf than we are ourselves.

Secondly, being resilient demands that you believe in your own self-efficacy – that is, the belief that you can change your situation or your response to it, and that you're not just a helpless pawn in other people's games. In most contexts it's obvious but you can quickly lose your sense of self-efficacy when you're at the whim of other people's decisions about your future – as many people in the public sector are finding at the moment. This uncertainty about when and where job cuts will fall is undoubtedly damaging, even if it's unavoidable.

You can build your sense of self-efficacy outside work, though, by throwing yourself into your family life, your hobby or your community. It might sound like a distraction but anything that bolsters your sense of being able to make a difference will help you deal with this loss of control in other contexts.

Lastly, all the authors recommend active experimentation – finding ways to change (or even leave) the stressful environment. This experimentation breaks the sense of 'learned helplessness' that can overcome people after even moderate periods of uncertainty, overload or bad relationships at work. You need to be willing to try 'something, anything' to change things – whether that's speaking out, getting together with others to problem-solve, tackling a bully or finding a new project to stimulate you. And again, a good friend or coach can help here – they can brainstorm possible actions with you, help you plan what to do or say and encourage you to start your experiment rather than just talking about it!

I have seen this work brilliantly for a team that was down in the dumps after their third unchosen reorganisation. Getting together in pairs to design and try some simple experiments improved the way they worked together and increased everyone's self-confidence and belief in their coaching abilities. As Karen Reivich says in her book *The Resilience Factor*, "contrary to some of the myths around resilience, resilient people don't go it alone. When bad stuff happens, they reach out to the people who care about them and they ask for help".

A secure base

This last set of 'resilience skills' are about long-term stress protection and they take longer to build.

We all know about the need for us to have social support and a good level of physical wellbeing to maintain our long-term health and manage stress effectively, so I won't go into the details. You can find out more in *The Resiliency Advantage* by Al Siebert and in Reivich's book.

Less commonly acknowledged is that we all also need some sense of mastery in our lives to stay resilient – at least one field of activity where we feel we just do it very well. It might be surgery, legal argument, gardening or even just being a great dad or friend. What matters is that it's something we can get immersed in, get better at and feel passionate about, regardless of what's happening in the rest of our lives at the time! It also increases that all-important sense of self-efficacy that we looked at earlier – if you don't have an interest or activity that you can feel masterful in, my most important long-term suggestion is to find one and stick with it. You'll be surprised at the difference it makes.

What I have done in this article is only to scratch the surface of resilience – we're learning more all the time, from psychology, physiology and neuroscience. But, importantly, we also know that putting into practice some of the small skills outlined above can make a real change to your 'bounce-back-ability' in both the short and the long term. Good luck with the bouncing! **TJ**

References

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