

- » What resilience is
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- » The six pillars of resilience

Chapter **1**

Embarking on the Journey to Resilience

Contrary to what many people think, resilience has nothing to do with avoiding stress, hardship, or failure in life. Instead, it's about knowing that life is filled with both joy and adversity and that when hardship happens, you'll be prepared to take it on, learn from it, and become stronger as a result. Resilience confers the ability to bounce back easily and thrive in the face of life's *many* inevitable challenges. In this chapter, I describe the factors that determine resilience, explain how it's possible to develop resilience even if your genes aren't wired that way, and set the stage for how you can embark on the journey to building your bounce back muscle and becoming stronger, wiser and feeling more fulfilled.

Resilience Is for Everyone

It's true that some people are naturally more resilient than others. These folks see challenges as opportunities, maintain a positive outlook, find meaning in the struggle, and successfully adapt to adversity. The good news is that even if it doesn't come naturally to you, you can build your bounce-back muscle. It comes

down to choosing not to let adversity get you down and instead work towards using the situation to become stronger and wiser. Here are your options:

- » **Stay broken:** Succumb to stress, fall apart, and stay that way — you're unable to recover normal functioning and feel helpless.
- » **Stay weak:** Succumb to stress, get injured, and partially recover — you're week and your functioning is still subpar.
- » **Get back to baseline:** Manage the stress and bounce back to baseline, whatever that may be.
- » **Become stronger:** Reckon with the stress and grow stronger, wiser, and fitter as a result.

You can choose to feel victimized by life's hardships or choose to accept them and make the most of every situation. You'll have to make some effort to build your resilience muscle, but it's absolutely possible, especially if your choice is to thrive rather than dive.

When you're ready to choose to thrive and embark on a journey to greater resilience, this book provides you with information, tools, skills, and so much more to help you along the way.

What Determines Resilience?

At some point, most people incur some form of suffering, whether it's the death of a loved one, illness, injury, divorce, job loss, or another difficult life event. Not everyone copes with adversity in the same way, though, because it's influenced by multiple factors. Some of these factors you have no control over, like your genes, the culture you grew up in, or critical life events that may have occurred in your past. Some of these factors are within your control, such as your beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and chosen networks of support. The question is, which of these determinants carries the most weight when it comes to resilience? Is it up to nature, or is it a result of nurture?

Though genetics does play a role, it appears that people have the ability to develop resilience despite genetics. According to a study conducted by the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Nursing Research, led by Heather Rusch, two critically important factors associated with resilience are in your control to change:

- » **Self-mastery:** The degree to which you perceive yourself as having control and influence over circumstance.
- » **Social support:** The degree to which you perceive you are cared for and receiving help from other people.

The stronger these two factors, according to the research, the higher the likelihood that an individual will be resilient in the face of trauma or stress.

In the next several sections, I describe the different factors that determine resilience and see how it all works.

Your genes

Though it hasn't been established that a single gene or gene variation confers resilience, it has been found that genetic factors can influence how you respond to stress and deal with adversity. A range of genes has been identified that are associated with resilient *phenotypes* (how a gene expresses itself physically). Genes or variations of genes, for example, can influence the stress response, nervous system, immune system, and pathways that produce feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine and determine your biological response to stress. The bottom line is that science is showing that although genes play a role in determining resilience, they're only part of the story because it's now widely known that nature and nurture go hand in hand.

Your life experiences — especially early life, culture, and behaviors — influence the expression of genes and the neurobiological systems that enable adaptation to stress and resilience. Meditation, exercise, healthy nutrition, and social support are examples of lifestyle changes that can effect such neurobiological changes and, possibly, genetic expression. In short, you can influence your genes and still achieve better self-mastery and social support.

Childhood development

Early childhood experiences can positively or negatively affect the development of the stress response and how individuals subsequently learn to cope with adversity. Trauma and abuse can lead to changes in central nervous system circuits, a hyperactive stress response, more anxious behavior, and vulnerability to stress from learned helplessness, as people learn to believe that they have no control to change their circumstance or situation.

It has also been shown that when individuals realize that it's possible to change behaviors — even in the face of adversity — and feel better, learned helplessness

doesn't happen. Examples might include when a child suffers bullying at school and receives a lot of love and support from family, friends, and counselors and is provided with effective coping tools. Children who gain the ability to adapt to stress develop better self-esteem, prosocial behavior, and more immunity to stress as they age.

As such, neither your genetics nor your past necessarily blocks you from being resilient. Either of these may support a tendency to adapt to stress more effectively or less effectively, but neither seals the deal on your ability to become stronger and more positive and have a better sense of self-mastery.

Culture

Individual behavior and coping styles are influenced by cultural patterns of beliefs, values, commitments, resources, and expected behaviors. Culture, therefore, can predict resilience as it shapes how people might see themselves and how they relate to others. The culture of a family can especially shape how a child develops a sense of self-concept and self-esteem. For example, a culture might value the woman's role as being quiet and docile, and subject to a man's authority, whereas another culture advocates for gender equality. Children growing up in either of these households will likely grow up to have very different self-concepts.

Culture refers not just to your ethnicity or religion but also to the culture of your family or your workplace. Cultures that promote respect, collaboration, reliance, open communication, and strong core values promote resilience within the community as well as individual resilience.

Psychological outlook

Your upbringing and environment can influence your outlook and how you see yourself and the world at large. A positive outlook has been found to be protective in the face of adversity and associated with better coping behaviors, quicker recovery times, improved health and wellbeing, and a better sense of self-mastery. The reverse is true for a negative outlook, as a negative view of oneself and the world increases the perception and magnitude of stress and reduces the sense of self-mastery and belief that challenges are manageable. A negative outlook is associated with limiting beliefs, negative self-talk, narrow thinking, and less effective coping habits.

A myriad of traits are associated with a positive outlook. Those most associated with resilience are believing that success is possible (optimism), viewing difficulties as opportunities for growth and learning, having the willingness to push forward, being able to accept change, and being open to making mistakes and

learning from failures. All these traits can be cultivated with practice and also aren't purely dependent on upbringing and genetics.

Coping habits

Coping habits are habits you have developed that have helped you get through challenges or difficulties. In general, there are two types of coping habits, adaptive and maladaptive.

- » **Adaptive** habits are the behaviors that help you cope with stress that are also healthy for the mind and body.
- » **Maladaptive** habits are behaviors that might reduce anxiety and therefore help you cope but are themselves destructive to your health.

Confronting your fears head-on, appraising situations realistically, calming your emotions, and maintaining healthy behaviors — like good sleep hygiene and a balanced exercise-and-nutrition regimen — are examples of adaptive coping habits. Choosing to avoid dealing with fear and drinking alcohol, binge eating, or throwing yourself into work so that you aren't sleeping, exercising, or eating appropriately are examples of maladaptive coping habits.

Some adaptive coping habits that improve resilience are exercising, eating a healthy diet, meditating, accessing social support, connecting to spirituality, learning to reappraise thoughts and beliefs, regulating emotions, and partaking in altruistic activities. These habits can be learned and cultivated, even when maladaptive coping has been the norm.

Social support

Support comes in the form of family, intimate partners, colleagues, neighbors, friends, spiritual community members, and others. The presence of strong networks of support and the seeking of social support are both associated with resilience. Both invigorate psychological hardiness and the ability to thrive in the face of adversity. Studies show that stronger social bonds can improve quality of life, wound healing, and life expectancy. In contrast, the lack of support is correlated with more depression and a weaker sense of control.

The ability to forge healthy social bonds, be able to communicate effectively, and show value and compassion are traits that a resilient person exemplifies, enabling them to have a truly viable social support system in times of need. With help, anyone can learn to improve their ability to form healthier relationships and stronger networks of support.

Humor

Sometimes, you have to laugh to literally keep yourself from crying, and when you do, it can make you more resilient. Humor helps you release stress, and it's a conduit to strengthening social bonds while being protective against stress. A study of sojourn students from mainland China attending school at a Hong Kong university, for instance, found that the students who used humor to adjust to the new culture were able to thrive best, and that humor acted as a buffer against stress.

Humor and laughter are wonderful resources when coping with hardship, because they lighten the load emotionally as well as physiologically. Laughter especially can relax the stress response, give you more energy, and soothe tension. It has also been found that laughter can improve your immune system, relieve pain, improve your mood, and enhance a sense of wellbeing. You always have the option to make use of your funny bone during times of stress.

Spirituality

The internal belief system that guides values, ethics, social behaviors, and psychological outlook also influences resilience. Individuals who have a strong sense of purpose, a feeling of connection to a greater whole, or a feeling of connection to spirituality are more resilient. Studies show that purpose in life is a key factor in helping individuals manage traumatic events, and that low spirituality is a leading predictor of low resilience. Whether it's because you have a sense of purpose, belong to a spiritual community, partake in healthier behaviors, or have a more optimistic outlook, science confirms that spirituality confers better health.

It doesn't matter what pathways you choose to connect to spirituality, because it comes in many forms. You can follow a particular faith or religion, feel connected to a higher power, spend time in nature, read uplifting literature, or be driven by a higher purpose. How spiritual you are today may be influenced by your upbringing and culture, but it's also a factor that can be cultivated in order to build your resilience.

What Resilience Is Not

Until I was in my late 20s, I believed that if I worked hard, good things would come my way, which drove me to complete medical school and a challenging residency. I also believed that my value was wrapped up in my accomplishments. Whenever I was praised or succeeded in an endeavor, I felt confident and good about myself. If I did not succeed or did not receive praise, my sense of value plummeted. I blamed myself for not being good enough and, as a result, worked even

harder — at the expense of my own health. When I finally took the time to self-examine my behavior, I came to understand that unless I succeeded or received praise, I had a pattern of feeling unworthy and victimized by the universe. I realized that I needed to work on myself, reach the source of my negative thinking, and find ways to correct it if I wanted to be a healthier and more resilient person.



REMEMBER

When you take responsibility for your behavior and learn to overcome feelings of victimization, helplessness, low self-worth, or hopelessness, you're truly on the path to resilience. I don't mean that you don't experience periods of fear, worry, or upset. Of course, you do! You're human. The key is that you don't stay in these negative states for too long because you're able to shift your perspective and use the situation to learn and grow.

The victim mindset

Life can be hard, and when it knocks you down, it's normal to fall and even to cry. *Staying* in a state of pity for too long though, can lead to a victim mindset, where you feel you're powerless to effect change and that life is totally out of your control.

When you have a *victim mentality*, you believe that life is happening to you rather than for you or with you. It's a mindset that usually develops over time, after experiencing multiple setbacks or hurts or the loss of love and support. Eventually, you decide that you have no control over life and that you're helpless to change it. As a result, you may avoid taking responsibility for yourself or your life and avoid taking risks, embracing change, improving yourself, or making hard decisions. Instead, you may live in fear, complain a lot, and tempt other people to feel sorry for you. This list describes some of the signs that indicate you're on the verge of having a victim mentality:

» **You feel powerless.** When bad things happen to you, you believe that you have no control over the situation and that you're helpless to effect change. You believe you have no power and are therefore a victim of life's circumstances. Powerlessness can manifest as a lack of self-esteem, feelings of failure and incompetence, and low motivation.

If you find that you're feeling helpless or powerless, ask yourself, "What is it that I do have control over? Is the belief that I am powerless true?"

» **You put yourself down.** Feeling powerless often goes hand in hand with negative self-talk and self-doubt. You question your abilities, feel you aren't worthy of success, believe you're incapable of succeeding, and often end up self-sabotaging your efforts. You regularly put yourself down and, in so doing, paint yourself as a victim.

If you find that you're putting yourself down, ask yourself, "Am I really that terrible? Is this belief even true? Can I think of times when I was successful?"

» **You overgeneralize the negative.** When a negative event happens, you overgeneralize and view it as part of a continued pattern of negativity and ignore evidence to the contrary — that many aspects of your life, and even similar situations, have been positive. You may use the words *never*, *always*, *all*, *every*, *none*, *no one*, *nobody*, or *everyone* to support your belief that you don't, and never will, have or be enough or that a situation will forever be bad. Examples of statements you might make are "I can never win," "I am always the last to know," and "You never listen to me."

If you make these kinds of statements, ask yourself, "Are there times when this doesn't happen?" and "Is this statement really true?"

» **You catastrophize.** When you exaggerate the importance of a problem, making it bigger than it necessarily is, you're *catastrophizing*. For instance, you might tell yourself that you absolutely cannot handle a given situation when the reality is that it's just inconvenient. In other words, you believe that even the smallest inconveniences are the end of the world. A tendency to make such problems important can indicate your underlying fears of being inadequate, unimportant, or dispensable.

If you find that you catastrophize and make mountains out of a molehill, ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that could happen? Is this statement really true?"

» **You feel paranoid.** You regularly feel that the world is out to get you and inflict misery on you. You believe that no matter what you do, life will be miserable and always unfair and you can't count on anything, least of all other people. Life is not only happening to you but also against you.

If you find yourself feeling like life is against you, ask yourself, "Are there times when things went my way? Is this belief really true?"

Learned helplessness

Most people vacillate between feeling optimistic and feeling victimized, depending on what is happening in their lives and how they're feeling about themselves at that particular juncture. Though people don't start out feeling victimized as children, for the most part, they can eventually learn to feel this way as they incur hardships, traumas, or other difficult life events that may cause them to feel more helpless about affecting change in their lives. For some people, as they face continuous negative and uncontrollable hardships, and their efforts fail at effecting change, they eventually stop trying and give up believing that they have any power to improve their circumstances.



REFLECTION

Is there something in your life you have tried to do and regularly failed, so you gave up trying? How did that failure make you feel?

The term *learned helplessness* was coined by the psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier in 1967, when they were studying how dogs behaved when experiencing electric shocks. Seligman and Maier discovered that dogs who realized that they couldn't escape the shocks eventually stopped trying, even when it was possible for them to avoid the shock by jumping over a barrier. In later experiments, Seligman studied human subjects and their response to loud and unpleasant noises. Subjects had the option to use a lever to stop the noise. Subjects whose lever was ineffective at stopping the noise gave up trying after one round.

Learned helplessness can show up in all aspects of your life. You can see it all around you if you look. People are discouraged about politics and decide not to vote, or they're discouraged about losing weight because nothing has worked, or their best friend won't leave a bad relationship because they believe that no one better is out there, or their child has decided not to study because they believe that they will fail anyway. You or someone you know might be depressed, emotionally unpredictable, unmotivated, and unwilling to change healthy habits. When you learn over time that you have little to no control over your life and life circumstances, no matter what you do, you give up hope and give up trying. It may keep you in an abusive relationship or a stressful job or keep you physically ill, even though you have options available to you to get out and change.

Here are some common signs of learned helplessness:

- » Mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- » Inability to ask for help
- » Easy frustration and willingness to give up
- » Lack of motivation and desire to put in effort
- » Low self-esteem and lack of self-belief in success
- » Passivity in the face of stress
- » Procrastination

Hopelessness

When you feel *hopeless*, you lack hope in the possibility of a better future. This belief negatively affects how you see the world, yourself, and other people. It can lead to feeling depressed, as though darkness has descended on your life and there's no point in doing anything. You're devoid of inspiration and you have no interest in going out, seeing people, working, or engaging in normal activities. The scarcity of social connection and poor motivation to seek help then adds to feelings of isolation or abandonment, exacerbating the feeling of hopelessness.

Hopelessness is often associated with mental health issues like anxiety, depression, substance dependency, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, and bipolar disorder. It can also show up intermittently during periods of difficulty and eventually pass when life lets up a bit. The problem is that when you fall into hopelessness, it can feel like a trap so that you lose the motivation to find help and get out, even though you have plenty of pathways to do so.

I have worked with many people who have complained of depression and described feeling this way. I personally have faced “the darkness of my soul” at critical junctures in my life, after experiencing one traumatic event after another. For my clients as well as myself, feeling hopeless was a symptom of feeling defeated, dissatisfied, and beat up by life events and feeling too exhausted to gather the energy to fight back. With time, love, and support, and reappraising my core beliefs and improving self-care, hopelessness was eventually turned back into hope.



REMEMBER

If you’re having difficulty getting out of the trap, I cannot stress enough how important it is to seek help from a therapist, counselor, or trusted friend. You aren’t on this journey alone, and you have available options to feel better, as both I and my clients discovered.

Here are some signs that you’re starting to feel hopeless:

- » Your situation will never improve.
- » It’s too late for you to change.
- » No one can help you.
- » You will never be happy again.
- » You will never find love.
- » You have no future.
- » Success isn’t possible.

Breaking the Victim Cycle

The first step to breaking the victim cycle is to first accept that you’re human and that it’s normal to feel stress, fear, anxiety, grief, and loss. You want to accept that when you feel negative emotions and are overcome by stress, it’s natural for your brain to trigger a fight-or-flight response and to cause you to feel more fear or overwhelm. The next step is to *choose* not to stay there.

When you make the choice to shift your mindset away from the victim mentality, you choose to remember that you have the ability to view yourself and your life differently; you have the ability to access resources to not only survive difficulty but also to come out better and stronger. Once you have made the choice to shift, you can then access the tools that will support you to attain a more resilient mindset and eventually stay there.

You will see in this book how to recognize negative and self-sabotaging thoughts and then take responsibility for them, realizing that you have the power to shift them to a more positive narrative. You will see how to connect with and regulate your emotions, develop positive beliefs and a more optimistic outlook, uphold behaviors that will support you to thrive, and cultivate strong social support networks. Embarking on this journey ultimately requires that you take responsibility for your life; take ownership for your actions, thoughts, and feelings; and do a bit of work to design your life in a way that empowers you to be at your best. When you make the choice to do so, you break the victim cycle.

If you're ready to become a master of your life, you're ready to build your six pillars of resilience.

Cultivating the Six Pillars of Resilience

Over the past 30 years, I have worked toward better understanding what makes a person more resilient. It has been both a personal journey as well as a process that I have guided thousands of patients and clients through. I have discovered that developing resilience and ultimately *fitness*, or the ability to bounce back from hardship even stronger and wiser than before, involves cultivating these six major pillars of resilience:

- » Physical hardiness
- » Emotional equilibrium
- » Mental clarity and toughness
- » Spiritual connection
- » Loving relationships and strong social connections
- » Influential leadership within your community

Developing physical hardiness

Physical hardiness can facilitate resilience and protect you from the negative effects of stress. If you think about it, it makes sense that feeling physically fitter would help you be more resilient. It also makes sense that when you feel physically sick or weak, life feels that much harder. It's impossible to think clearly, work effectively, or fully enjoy life when your body is sick, tired, inflamed, and not functioning at its best. Whether it's caused by lack of sleep, exercise, or proper nutrition or by poor work conditions, hectic scheduling, or negative thinking, inflammation and a lack of proper fuel will leave you lacking fighting power when stress comes your way.

Improving physical vitality requires that you perceive everything in your life as something that is either enriching your health or hurting it; providing you with fuel that will enhance your life force or taking fuel away that will diminish your life force. Whether it's by improving your quality of sleep, developing an exercise routine, abiding by a healthy nutrition plan, or developing a meditation practice, the key is to challenge the body physically yet also fuel it appropriately so that you can thrive instead of dive.

Achieving emotional equilibrium

Positive emotions serve as fuel, in that they fuel you to feel strong, capable, and confident — as though you can conquer challenges. Negative emotions, on the other hand, if persistent, align you with fear-based thinking and behaviors and can lead you through the victim cycle. Studies show that resilient individuals are emotionally balanced; they not only maintain positive emotions in the face of stress but also use them to bounce back from negative experiences as they remain confident, optimistic, and open.

The path toward improving resilience involves learning how to become more self-aware, mindful, and relaxed so that you can regulate your emotions, find your equilibrium, and shift into a more positive state. The path involves learning to use negative emotions as signals and opportunities for growth and change, thus controlling them instead of letting them control you. Through mindfulness practices, self-observation, and techniques that help you release your negative emotions, you learn to quiet your emotions, find harmony within yourself, and have access to optimism and positive belief.

Boosting mental clarity and toughness

When fear takes over, the stress response is activated, releasing stress hormones into your brain and body and causing feel-good neurotransmitter levels to drop and fear-related behaviors and thinking to preside. Your ability to think clearly

and make good decisions diminishes. A person who is more resilient has the capability to override this physiological change and maintain clarity of mind, objectivity, and rational thinking. Rather than fall apart, they keep it together, work through the stress, and persevere.

Being able to boost your mental clarity and stay mentally tough in the face of hardship requires that you be self-aware, calm, open to change, and comfortable with not having all the answers, in the belief that, come what may, you have what it takes to prevail. It involves maintaining a positive and optimistic mental attitude, no matter the circumstance, and having the grit and stamina to keep trying, even when you experience setbacks.

Enriching spiritual connection

A growing body of evidence is showing that a spiritual outlook makes humans more resilient to trauma. The literature also shows that possessing a sense of meaning and purpose in life is positively related to quality of life and improved health and functioning. People with greater spirituality partake in healthier behaviors, maintain a more positive world view, are more connected to a community, and feel a greater sense of belonging — all factors that strengthen resilience.

Enhancing your connection to spirituality can take many forms. You can awaken and harness this pillar of resilience via meditation or nonreligious prayer, practicing mindfulness, spending time in nature, joining a spiritual community, reading uplifting literature, volunteering, or working toward a greater understanding of your higher purpose. Experiencing resilience with a spiritual lens helps you stay more positive and optimistic, find meaning in difficulty, express more gratitude, discover stronger social support, employ healthier behaviors, and improve your coping skills.

Establishing healthy relationships

Humans are social creatures. They have an innate desire to belong and to be together. Numerous studies show that social support is essential for maintaining physical and psychological health. Not all relationships, unfortunately, are created equal. Quality relationships can support your resilience, and unhealthy ones can break it. Though healthy, high-quality relationships can buffer stress and can help you live longer, heal faster, and improve behaviors, unhealthy relationships can lead to physical and emotional distress, self-sabotaging behaviors, and loss of self-confidence and self-mastery.

To build your resilience, you therefore want to establish loving and healthy relationships that support you to thrive. This requires taking a deeper dive into yourself, uncovering your core values and feelings of worth, learning to accept and love yourself, and committing to knowing that your relationships will help you learn and grow. It involves examining your current relationships, assessing your levels of commitment and investment, improving your sense of compassion, and learning how to effectively communicate, express gratitude, see value, and receive as well as give.

Belonging to a community and becoming a leader

When you understand that you're part of a community and you cultivate this network of support, you enhance your resilience. Knowing that you belong and that a group of people have your back helps you know that you have assistance and resources to mitigate uncertainty. It supports you to stay optimistic and feel secure, encourages you to work well with others as a team, enhances your sense of trust and confidence that success is possible, and helps you find purpose in difficult times.

The more cohesive and resilient the community, the better off you are. Studies show that people who are affiliated with communities that are prepared and have resources to manage adversity are more resilient than those individuals who lack such an affiliation. Building this pillar of resilience thus involves strengthening your networks of support and helping your community become more resilient itself. It involves knowing that, to some extent, even if you aren't a CEO, a captain of a team, or someone's boss, you still have influence on the people around you and you have a choice of whether you want that influence to be positive or negative.

Building this pillar involves working through blocks and negative mindsets that might keep you alienated, isolated, or unable to seek support, and also learning to find value in the virtues and efforts of people around you. It entails becoming aware of the influence you have on others; communicating more effectively; remaining clearheaded, authentic, and insightful; and being a positive and resilient leader who inspires others to do the same.

Ultimately, the path toward optimal resilience differs from one individual to the next because everyone has different genetic tendencies, backgrounds, and life circumstances, and some individuals are more fit in one pillar over the other. The beauty is that there is no single right way to get there, because many tools and many paths lead to the same place, where, eventually, stressful challenges become opportunities and life indeed becomes more joyful, successful, and rewarding. Are you ready to embark on the journey to resilience?