

Building Resilience

Factsheet

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from stressful or challenging experiences. It involves being able to adapt to changes and to approach negative events as constructively as possible.

Everyone’s life involves ups and downs. Developing a greater level of resilience won’t stop bad or stressful things from happening, but it can reduce the impact the stressor has on our lives and the time taken to recover from it.

Whether the experiences are everyday events like a late train or faulty computer, or longer term stressors such as a chronic illness, relationship breakdown, or loss of job; building our resilience can help us cope and bounce back from the experience.

Resilient individuals are said to be curious and open. They do things to increase their experience of positive emotions in the face of adversity, finding opportunities in some of life’s greatest challenges.

Why are some people more resilient than others?

We are all different, and some people are certainly more able to cope with stressful situations than others. There are a number of factors why some people react positively to a stressful or challenging experience in their life. Some of these factors are outlined below:

- **Individual health and wellbeing:** these are factors that can be developed such as having a strong sense of self, good social skills, a sense of purpose in life, self control, and an ability to regulate emotions and solve problems constructively. It also includes our level of physical health and wellbeing.

- **Individual factors:** these are factors we may have been born with such as genetics, personality, ethnicity, economic background, and how close we are socially and geographically to others.

- **Life history and experience:** past events and relationships in our lives have a certain level of influence on how we approach stressors in the present. This includes our family history, previous physical and mental health, previous experience of trauma, social and cultural experiences, and how we have coped with stressors in the past.

- **Social and community support:** this is the support provided from family, friends, members of our community, and work and school environments. Feeling connected to others, and drawing a sense of security and safety from these networks can buffer us during times of stress. Being able to draw on ready and available services like GPs and mental health professionals when needed is also important.

Some of these factors are outside our control. But a great many are things we can do something about, both for ourselves and for those around us. Have another look through the list. What are some of the areas you could work on to build your own resilience and that of those around you?



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How does resilience relate to my mental health?

Building our resilience can buffer us from developing mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. It does so by helping offset certain risk factors that increase the likelihood of experiencing a mental illness. Risk factors such as lack of social support, being bullied, experiencing trauma, socioeconomic disadvantage, and social or cultural discrimination. In other words, building your resilience can protect your mental health and wellbeing.

For people who live with mental illness, resilience can also help us to accept the setbacks and challenges of living with mental illness, developing the courage to take responsibility to manage our lives and recover, despite the limitations imposed by the condition.

Examples of Resilience

Strength-based research has found many common factors amongst young people in particular who have survived and thrived in the face of adversity and hardships. These studies provide evidence that resilient people draw on skills and qualities that help them cope during stress, and that these factors can be transferred to other people or situations, that is they are not unique or “special qualities”.

A classic study followed up children, a third of who were classified as ‘high risk’ due to poverty, family conflict and parental mental illness, for three decades. It found that one-third of the children grew up to be competent and confident as adults despite the stresses and adversity they experienced at a young age.

Across resilience research, studies have found what is important are the positive internal or external factors in a person’s life rather than the negative ones. These positive factors can buffer or protect a person from the negative impacts of traumatic experiences. Things like having a supportive teacher or mentor at school, having a strong engagement with sports or being able to set goals about the future are just some examples. For more examples of resilience research, see Lyn Worsley’s book ‘The Resilience Doughnut.’

Community Resilience

As we now know, resilience is something we can all develop. We can do this by drawing on our individual strengths and abilities as well as the connections and support we have from others around us like family, friends and our wider community. The sense of cohesion derived from belonging to a community can build a great sense of optimism and morale within us. Building a strong community can benefit each member of our community in times of stress, as recently witnessed during the Victorian bushfires in early 2009.

Community resilience is built by strengthening social networks, offering support to members of the community in times of need, working together on common goals, as well as ensuring safety and promoting healthy lifestyles.

An example of good community resilience might be a young single mother who lives in a suburb where there is access to childcare services, a regular bus service that allows her to take her child to and from childcare and a supportive neighbourhood, where there are other children her child can play with.



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By building a community that offers support, transport, and childcare, this single mother is given the assistance she needs to bring up a child on her own. By offering the support this young woman needs, her own resilience is improved, as well as that of the whole community who have helped this woman through her hardships.

What ways can you build a stronger, more resilient community? And how can you be more involved in your community? See our fact sheet, *'Sign up, link in, get involved'* for some ideas and check out this practical guide on building inclusive and resilience communities www.socialinclusion.gov.au/LatestNews/Pages/BuildingCommunityResilience.aspx

10 Tips to Build Your Resilience

We can all build and improve on our ability to be resilient when faced with stressful and difficult situations. Listed below are some helpful tips that you can use to build your resilience. They are adapted from the Mental Health Association NSW's popular *10 Tips to Stress Less* poster and postcard resources.

Have the courage to be imperfect

Continually striving for perfection in everything you do can lead to stress. Try to aim for "not bad at all" or "really quite good" instead of "perfect".

Take time for yourself

Do you have little or no time left over at the end of the day for yourself? Are you all things to all people? Allow yourself time to do things that you particularly enjoy. If you create boundaries around your time, and stick to them, others will respect them.

Sign up for that course, join that club

Getting involved in community activities can help develop your connections with others, create skills and boost your physical and mental wellbeing. All things that improve your resilience. See our fact sheet *"Sign up, Link in, Get involved"* for tips and ideas on how you can participate more in your community.

Be active every day in as many ways as you can

Being physically healthy is an important foundation for your resilience. The National Physical Activity Guidelines recommend 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a day. Play our *"Take Your Pick"* paper game for some fun ideas on how to get active.

Spend time with people who make you feel good

Nurturing a positive view of oneself is important for resilience. Spend time with people who help build your confidence and belief in yourself.

Laugh out loud each day

Laughing out loud can be a helpful way to reduce stress levels, so look for opportunities to introduce some humour into your day. Life can be truly absurd sometimes, so don't forget to laugh at it and look for the lighter side of frustrating situations.

Invite your neighbour over for a cup of tea

Research shows that relationships are one of the cornerstones of wellbeing. Close relationships and broad social networks are both important. There are simple ways to strengthen these ties, such as inviting a neighbour or friend over for a quick cup of tea.



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Do one thing now you've been putting off

Procrastination can be a major barrier to wellbeing, leading to stress and preventing us from doing the things that are important to us and good for us. Ask your friends for their best strategies for getting motivated.

Remember, this too shall pass

One way to build resilience is to keep things in perspective. If you can, avoid being overly negative about things that may be happening in your life. Even during the toughest times, try to keep an eye to the future and the likelihood that circumstances will change for the better.

Focus more on things you can control

There are many things in your life that you have no direct control over. Resilience involves being able to adapt to change with a minimum amount of stress. Instead of resisting or trying to manipulate things beyond your control, look at them as opportunities to learn and grow. Focus your attention on areas where you can make a difference.

Where to from here?

For further information you might like to have a look at some of these resources:

Contact these people/organisations:

Mental Health Information Service: 1300 794 991 or www.mentalhealth.asn.au for services in your area

Transcultural Mental Health Centre: information and referral on mental health issues: 1800 648 911
www.dhi.gov.au/tmhc

Websites and Books:

Changing Minds: www.changingminds.org.au

Resilience: Build skills to endure hardships:
www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078

Ingrid Poulson (2008) Rise. Pan MacMillian.

Lyn Worsley (2006) The Resilience Doughnut: the Secret of Strong Kids. Alpha Counselling Services, Eastwood.

Australian Social Inclusion Board (2009) Building Inclusive and Resilience Communities (2009), Australian Government, June 2009.
www.socialinclusion.gov.au/LatestNews/Pages/BuildingCommunityResilience.aspx

To obtain this fact sheet and other resources in different languages (Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hindi, Italian, Khmer, Korean, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese) please contact the Transcultural Mental Health Centre on 1800 648 911 or visit the website at www.dhi.gov.au/tmhc



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Sources

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Mental Health Information Service - information and referral on mental health issues: 1300 794 991 www.mentalhealth.asn.au

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