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REPUTATION MATTERS

# RESILIENCE

New Research Helps Us Bounce Back  
Quicker, Better from Life's Trials and  
Tragedies

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# RESILIENCE

## New Research Helps Us Bounce Back Quicker, Better from Life's Trials and Tragedies

How do we become more resilient leaders, executives, entrepreneurs, parents, people? Here's a quick checklist, informed by new brain research:

- Practice overcoming hurdles in everyday life
- Have a purpose
- Accept reality with a positive attitude
- Learn how to improvise
- Meditate (mindfulness training)
- Exercise
- Develop an abiding sense of humor
- Build strong support networks
- Look for role models
- Keep your mind flexible
- Face your fears
- Reframe
- Nurture a strong sense of self
- Know when to be kind to yourself
- Be compassionate

Resilience is a concept that exists in almost every culture around the world: the ability to bounce back from adversity, from whatever setbacks life deals you, in order to come back and conquer another day.

From Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*: “The world breaks everyone, and afterwards many are strong in the broken places”...

...To the concept of the *Refiner's Fire* invoked by author Mark Helprin: being forged by walking through fire, and coming out finer, stronger, better, and more indomitable...

...To the Japanese Daruma doll, a version of the Buddha with no arms or legs, so he can always snap back from setbacks – “Seven times down; eight times up”...

Resilience has been the Holy Grail for those individuals or organizations that have gone through crisis and adversity and want, literally, to “get their lives back.”

But while it has always been known that some people, and some organizations, recover better than others, new brain and behavioral research is now shedding light on why. Even better, it is showing that we can cultivate resilience in ourselves before we even need it.

## TRUE GRIT

By studying the habits and brains of “gritty,” determined, indomitable, highly resilient people, science is adding to what we know about fostering resilience. And it turns out that resilience really is like a muscle – you can have a propensity for it, and can make it stronger through practice and training. Yet, just like a muscle, you can also overtax it or stretch it to the breaking point.

So, [research](#) has shown that an uneventful history does not necessarily prepare organizations or individuals for tough times, but neither does an unceasingly troubled history. Rather the qualities of resistance training can be put into play: the experience of being firmly grounded as a child, [and then having to overcome progressively more challenging hurdles](#) seems to strengthen our ability to face the worst life has to offer.

In fact, Robert Krulwitsch found that [a disproportionate number of U.S. presidents lost a father when they were young](#).

So, our first rule to cultivate resiliency is:

- **Practice Overcoming Hurdles Wherever You Find Them In Everyday Life**

# Resilience

*"Seven Times Down,  
Eight Times Up"*

How to become a more resilient leader, executive, entrepreneur, parent, person:

## Checklist

1. Practice overcoming hurdles in everyday life
2. Have a purpose
3. Accept reality with a positive attitude
4. Learn how to improvise
5. Meditate (mindfulness training)
6. Exercise
7. Develop an abiding sense of humor
8. Build strong support networks
9. Look for role models
10. Keep your mind flexible
11. Face your fears
12. Reframe
13. Nurture a strong sense of self
14. Know when to be kind to yourself
15. Be compassionate



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## NEW RESEARCH, OLDER INSIGHTS

Recently, I gave a [speech at Chautauqua Institution](#) on new research and older insights about resilience, and how we can cultivate it in ourselves, our families, and our organizations. The list of 15 attributes I included comes from reading over 70 books and articles on the topic, as well as from my practice in crisis management and recovery, and from not insignificant personal experience recovering from a near-fatal taxi crash 10 years ago. A short reading list follows at the end of this article, with many terrific sources, but the most important sources are from Steven Southwick and Dennis Charney, especially their book: [Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges](#) and their article in [Scientific American Mind](#). I can't recommend them highly enough, along with articles written by Diane Coutu in [HBR](#), Eric Barker in [Time](#), [David DeSteno](#), and [Mandy Oaklander](#).

While no one prescription is guaranteed to help each of us and our organizations go through the tough times we will inevitably face, there should be something in this list to help most. The trick is to draw upon those items that seem on point to you. I hope they will be of value.

## HOW TO BECOME MORE RESILIENT

- **Start with a Purpose**

Author Diane Coutu states in her landmark article in the *Harvard Business Review*, "[How Resilience Works](#)," that highly resilient individuals and organizations usually believe in something bigger than themselves – it could be religion, but it could also be a credo, an ethical construct, a code of conduct, a grander corporate or personal purpose, a vision. This gives us all something to fight for when the going gets tough that is more inspiring, and more powerful.

- **Develop a Staunch Acceptance of Reality**

Coutu also states that a staunch ability to accept reality – rather than over-optimism or over-pessimism – helps folks prepare for the long haul. Today some are calling this trait “realistic positivism.” Neither Pollyanna nor doomsayer, neither ostrich nor full of bravado, seeking to see the situation as it is, while staying positive about your ability to retain agency and cope, influence, or conquer, appears to be the right mix.

- **Learn How to Improvise**

A spirit of improvisation – learning how to think around corners and make things happen that are “out of the box” – is critical to full resiliency, says Coutu. I use as an inspiration the book *Swiss Family Robinson*, or the movie *Castaway*. There you are, trapped on a deserted island with only some video tape and a volleyball – how do you use these things to help you survive? Alternately, take an Improv comedy class – it will help you hone your improvisational thinking, something sorely needed when all the rules you have known shift into chaos in a crisis.

- **Meditate**

The one constant across almost all the research is [meditation](#) (or for those who prefer, mindfulness training.)

The ability to focus one’s attention, stay in the moment, not attach to problems, let obsessive thoughts “float away,” and control one’s breath and anxiety level, has real and immediate positive results, including lowering blood pressure says the article, “[Mindfulness Can Improve Your Attention and Health](#),” in *Scientific American*.

Literally, as Buddhists and mystics have been telling us for ages, [meditation rewires the brain](#) into a healthier ecosystem. Through meditation, we prepare our neural pathways for

[resilience](#), lowered emotional response to trying situations, and therefore the ability to withstand stress.

So, whether you take a Transcendental Meditation course, learn Buddhist meditation, or get a good audiobook, do learn how to meditate and start practicing daily, in order to become resilient before you need to. Ommm.

- **Exercise**

Another no-brainer is exercise. We all know about the healthy effect of endorphins on the body and brain. Moreover, to quote [Time](#), “In an interesting twist, scientists have learned that working the body’s muscles makes people’s minds more resilient as well. That’s because exercise also spurs the development of new neurons, which are quite literally damaged by stress, Southwick says. Over time, regular exercise can tamp down a person’s stress response.”

- **Develop An Abiding Sense of Humor**

Remember the *Reader’s Digest* column, “Laughter is the Best Medicine?” Well, it turns out they were right. [Research quoted by the Mayo Clinic](#) finds that humor improves your mood, relieves pain, improves your immune system, soothes tension, and relieves stress response.

Humor also allows us to distance ourselves just a bit from the problem, thus lessening its hold on us. [Victor Frankl](#), a psychiatrist who wrote about surviving concentration camps, stated, “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.” So, whether gallows humor or a good, loud guffaw, humor does help both body and soul, and encourages resiliency.

- **Build Strong Support Networks**

[The science is clear](#): strong social networks are a huge contributor to resilience in the face of trouble. Southwick and Charney, in their book put it this way: “A particularly effective way to enhance resilience is to strengthen one’s relationships because doing so can dampen your biological response to stress and bolster your courage in tense situations.”

New fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging of the brain) research even shows the difference between those who face trouble with a friend in the room vs. those who face the trouble alone. And prisoners of war were found to survive despicable situations far longer when, even in isolation, they could communicate with their fellow inmates through taps and sounds.

We are social animals, and the support of one’s family and community can

encourage resilience even in those who might not otherwise exhibit it.

- **Look for Role Models**

Of course, role models help in almost every endeavor, but when you are under great pressure, and do not have anything to draw upon from your personal experience to help, knowing someone who has gone through what you are facing can be of immeasurable aid. That is why in hospital heart units they used to (perhaps still do) have patients who survived open heart surgery and successfully returned to their daily lives visit patients about to undergo the surgery. If they can do it, so can you, the thought is, and role models will help you learn how. Invaluable.

- **Keep Your Mind Flexible**

[Neuroplasticity](#) is “the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life” – or literally rewire – allowing the brain to compensate for injury or disease. In other words, it is almost the definition of resilience.

It turns out that we can [train our brains](#) to have more cognitive and emotional flexibility: Keep doing new things and try to stay out of ruts; [practice](#) what you already know; keep learning – everything, including new languages; and interestingly, keep listening to music. Maria Popova writes

in “[Musicked Down the Mountain: How Oliver Sacks Saved His Own Life by Literature and Song](#)” of how Oliver Sacks (who just passed away at 82) recovered years ago from grievous injury through listening to music, and Cold Spring Harbor Lab Professor Anne Churchland speaks about music’s power to rewire the brain in a [2-hour lecture on YouTube](#).

I found, after a similar injury to Sacks’, that my incessant listening to every kind of music available during a long hospital stay and recuperation not only induced joy and heightened resilience, but also had a wildly unforeseen effect – previously tone deaf, now I can almost unerringly carry a tune, and no longer only am able to sing in my car, when no one is there to listen! Rewired, indeed.

- **Reframe**

Haven’t you heard someone say, “oh, that accident/tragedy/divorce was the best thing that ever happened to me – it caused me to re-evaluate my life, make some changes, and turn into a better person”? They are reframing.

[Reframing](#) – or cognitive reappraisal – is “based on the observation that we all have stories about ourselves.” In some stories we are the hero, in others the victim or the villain. Reframing helps us broaden and build our stories to see our affliction as critical to growth and happiness. Hardship turns into a

challenge; adversity paves the way for opportunity, suffering turns into an opportunity to understand others and grow in compassion.

As Southwick and Charney say in their *Scientific American Mind* article, reframing can help someone ask: “Is there something that I can learn from this experience, or is it possible to grow stronger as a result?”

- **Face Your Fears**

Learning to double-down on facing fear, rather than running from it, allows us to find our courage. Facing the things that scare us relaxes fear circuitry in the brain and builds strength and resilience.

[Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön](#) says that the journey of courage is really the journey of knowing fear, and that from this wisdom we learn to embrace the fullness of our experience in life.

Eric Barker, in his superb [blog and column in Time](#), says conquering fear is all about control. “When we feel in control, we’re not afraid,” even if we have only the illusion that we are in control...but “without a feeling of control, when stress gets high we literally can’t think straight.”

What to do? Barker quoting research of Harvard Medical School professor [Ronald Siegel](#) says, “You need to spend time with your fears. Get closer to them.

Intensify them. Only then will you stop being afraid.”

Says Siegel in his book *The Mindfulness Solution*: “Now that you’ve developed a clear experience of anxiety, try intensifying it. Make it as strong as you can while sitting here holding this book. Don’t worry; this is safe. I promise it won’t last forever. Once you feel as though you’ve generated about as much anxiety as you can muster, see if you can hold on to it. Set a timer or look at your watch and try to keep the anxiety going at the same level for at least 10 minutes. If it starts to fade, try to intensify it again. Now that you’ve practiced bearing your anxiety, you can bring your attention back to your breath for a few more minutes and feel what that is like.” And this, they tell us, is how to face your fears, and win.

- **Nurture a Strong Sense of Self**

Self-esteem – a positive view of yourself that is robust, grounded in reality, and healthy – is a key building block for resilience. After all, in a true shock to the system, you lose touch with your core, and can forget who you were before the crisis hit. You forget your real power and ability to make positive change, and often need to be reminded not to underestimate your influence, even in an impossible situation.

At the same time, having a strong sense of self also means having a strong

internal moral compass that can serve as a guide in times of extremis.

The more deep-seated, “authentic,” and integrated an individual’s or an organization’s moral code and sense of self are, the less likely they are to lose their way. The crisis becomes the aberration, not the rule, and bad circumstances are less likely to throw you off your game. Therapy, of course, can help, both before and after a problem occurs.

- **Know When to Be Kind to Yourself**

Guilt and blame are a very mixed bag. Often they are called for, of course, and can be the catalysts for changed and improved lives.

Other times, we tend to take the blame for events that really were not our fault. We do this, as often is the case in rape, in order to pretend we had some kind of control in a totally chaotic situation. Psychologists say that a woman will often blame herself (for being out too late, wearing the wrong thing, etc.) so as not to bear the knowledge that she is living in a random world where bad things can come from out of the blue and hurt us profoundly.

But blame quickly morphs into the antithesis of resilience – self-loathing. And the ability to be kind to oneself is one of the most critical elements to



bouncing back, learning, and moving ahead to the future.

- **Be Compassionate**

“When you’re feeling helpless, help someone,” Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) famously said, when asked how she spent so many years under house arrest in Myanmar without losing hope.

And it turns out that she was right. When you are kind to others, your brain processes it as if someone was being kind to you! So, in a cosmic double-header, when you are kind and compassionate to others, you feel better – and are more resilient – yourself. Moreover, there is no better way to exercise agency, or power over your surroundings, than by demonstrating kindness to others.

So, the road to resiliency can be found not only in these 15 steps, but in a relentless life of fierce kindness...and that is indeed a life worth bouncing back to.

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on Forbes.com.*

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