

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

How Emotional Resilience Works

The attitudes that underlie emotional resilience are powerful because they enable people who subscribe to them to cope with great efficiency and effectiveness. It's not really that emotionally resilient people know more or better coping skills than do non-resilient people. It's more that they are better able to apply the coping skills that they do know than are non-resilient people.

Consider if you will, that the first principle of coping successfully is to believe that it is possible to cope. Resilient people believe that they have the potential for control over their lives; they believe that they can influence their situation. Non-resilient people tend not to share this belief, and consequently their stress-coping efforts don't fair as well. People don't work at coping when they don't believe that coping can help.

Stress is stressful precisely because it is a source of negative emotions: depression, anxiety, anger. These negative emotions exert a powerful influence over perception. While you are experiencing negative emotions it can easily seem that there is no way to resist them. Depression, for example, often feels like it is a permanent condition that must simply be experienced; that nothing can be done to make it go away. Though this perception of being helpless in the face of negative emotion is seductive, it is not necessarily true. It is possible to consciously influence and change one's negative moods to more positive moods. Simply deciding to exercise (physically) when feeling stressed can temporarily lift one's mood, for instance. Rationally challenging negatively exaggerated perceptions is another effective method for lifting one's mood. It is, in fact, quite possible to think or act one's self into a better mood. Resilient people understand this intuitively. For the rest of us, there is a scientific explanation as to how this is possible.

Mind Over Matter

The past quarter century of neurological research has revolutionized our understanding of how the brain creates and regulates emotion. Scientists used to think that the limbic system, a set of brain structures occurring above the brain stem but below the wrinkled, walnut-shaped cortex, was wholly responsible for producing and managing emotions. Recent studies suggest that it is not that simple. Though emotional impulses do originate in the limbic system, our expression of those emotions is regulated by the prefrontal cortex, a cortical brain structure located just behind the forehead, which is associated with judgment and decision-making.

The involvement of the prefrontal cortex in emotional responding is one of the things that separate humans from animals. Animals have little control over their expression of emotions. When an animal's limbic system becomes activated, that animal will experience and act out the resulting emotion. Scared animals will instinctually run and hide, or get aggressive, for instance. Human beings, on the other hand are able to make judgments and decisions regarding their emotional state, and to act on those decisions even when those decisions run counter to their emotional state. Frightened humans can evaluate whether or not their fears are justified, and act counter to their fears, for instance, making a speech in public despite being afraid of possible negative judgments that might result. People's ability to change the way they experience emotion is important for two reasons: first because it means that people have a real, if limited, capacity to snap out of negative emotions that don't serve them, and second because choosing to snap out of negative emotions is usually a good decision that can have a positive influence on one's overall health.

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In part then, resilient people believe they can change their moods, and so they work to change their moods. The less resilient among us can instead fall prey to hopelessness. A major purpose of this document is to help convince those of you who do fall prey to hopelessness that it is possible to become more resilient. We've just described how it is possible that you can change your negative moods to more positive ones. Now, let us tell you why it is a very good idea to do this.

The first reason you should work to become more resilient is that the positive moods that you'll enjoy more of when you become more resilient are really good for your health.

Accumulating research suggests that the positive emotions (happiness, contentment, joy, etc.) are associated with healthy immune system functioning. Conversely, the negative emotions are associated with weaker immune function, greater production of stress hormones such as Cortisol, and greater incidence of illnesses. These findings suggest that how you habitually feel is much related to how vigorously you can resist illness.

To illustrate, consider that in one study depressed women suffering from breast cancer were found to have fewer immune system cells and weaker overall immune functioning when compared to non-depressed breast cancer sufferers. Because the immune system's job is, in part, to hunt down and kill cancer cells, depressed breast cancer sufferers weaker immune function means that their bodies are less likely to be able to resist their cancers. In the same vein, another study found that depressed bone marrow transplant patients were significantly more likely to die during the first post-treatment year than were non-depressed transplant recipients.

Positive emotions benefit your social health as well as your physical health. Sharing of positive emotions with others helps to bond people together, creating and maintaining strong, healthy, and caring relationships. Caring relationships, in turn, provide social support, which nourishes further emotional resilience, and positive feeling states. It is a circular, self-reinforcing movement towards health. The better you feel, and the more you share that positive feeling with others, the more you are able to draw upon the relationships you create through that sharing to create further positive feelings.

The social support benefits of relationships are numerous and important:

- Close caring relationships offer opportunities to express and to receive love, both of which are important for identity, self-worth and self-esteem. They offer a path towards becoming part of something larger than yourself, which you can identify in a positive manner. They keep you from feeling lonely. They support you when you are down. They are environments in which it becomes likely you will experience positive states: 1) feeling accepted and cared for, and 2) happy playfulness.
- Inside the give and take of relating are many opportunities to practice social skills (which turn out to be resilience skills as will become clear later on). Healthy relationships promote communication, reciprocity and compassion. They also function as a sounding board, and can provide opportunities for reality testing. Friends may offer workable solutions to problems you would have never come up with on your own.
- By offering you opportunities to network with people you would not otherwise meet, relationships can benefit you economically (by helping you to find work or work opportunities), and romantically (by introducing you to potential romantic partners).
- Where positive feelings help you to build relationships, negative feelings do the opposite. Depressed, negative feeling states tend to break relationships down and erode social support. Negative feelings tend to be consuming and to promote self-centeredness. They do not motivate people to attend to the needs of others. Though friends and family often want to support their depressed relationship partners, they find this a difficult task, as depressed, negative people tend to withdraw from offers of support and to isolate themselves. It is ultimately frustrating to remain in relationships with negative-minded people and one by one, the relationships that depressed people have grow more distant or extinguish.

There are real health and wellness benefits for being resilient. It's something worth striving for, if you aren't already that way. Importantly, resilience is a learnable skill. Most anyone can become more emotionally resilient if they work at it.