



Understanding and Building Resilience

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WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

The simplest way to define resilience is the ability to “bounce back” from life’s difficulties – to adapt well in the face of adversity or significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship issues, major health problems or financial hardships.

Experts call the ability to cope with life’s difficulties a “capacity for resilience.” Everyone has stored different amounts, or reserves, of resilience to use when necessary.

An individual’s capacity for resilience varies, depending on background and life experiences. Fortunately, no one is stuck with the same stores of resilience their whole life. Everyone – including you – can become more resilient through learning and practice.

One thing you can do to increase your capacity for resilience is develop a healthy view of change. As outlined in another Extension course, “Change: Loss, Opportunity and Resilience,” people are more resilient if they view change as offering opportunities for growth and satisfaction, rather than only loss or danger.

How much resilience do you need? That depends on what’s going on in your life. If you are experiencing relatively few or minor stressors, you probably can keep up with the “speed of change” with relatively small reserves of resilience. But if you’re facing multiple or major stressors – such as divorce or job loss – you will probably become overwhelmed unless you have an adequate capacity for resilience.

WHAT DOES RESILIENCE LOOK LIKE?

As noted, everyone can become more resilient through learning and practice. You can start by learning that resilient people possess five key characteristics, or qualities:

- Positive
- Focused
- Flexible
- Organized
- Proactive.



Let's look more closely at these characteristics.

Positive people understand the dangers and threats in change, but are not overwhelmed by them. They are able to compartmentalize stress - keep it separate from other parts of their lives - so it doesn't disrupt their lives. Positive people are practical and realistic, but at the same time can "reframe" a changing situation - view it in a more favorable light that allows for action and growth. As noted in the online course, positive people also:

- Maintain a sense of humor.
- Attend to their overall well-being (take care of their physical and emotional health).
- "Lead" with empathy - put themselves in others' shoes.

Focused people determine where they are headed and stick to their goals so barriers along the way do not become insurmountable. They give blocks or obstacles sufficient attention, but not so much that they fail to reach their goals. As noted in the online course, focused people also:

- Develop a clear vision of what they hope to achieve.
- Remain true to their core values.

Flexible people are open to different options when faced with uncertainty. They recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses; they know when to accept internal and external limits. In short, flexible people know how to adapt to changing situations and conditions. As noted in the online course, flexible people also:

- Challenge, and when necessary, modify personal assumptions or frames of reference.
- Acknowledge that there are a number of right ways to accomplish important goals.

Organized people develop structured approaches to managing ambiguity (uncertainty). They set goals and priorities, but when necessary, renegotiate them during change. Organized people recognize when to ask others for help. As noted in the online course, organized people also take the lead in clarifying roles when working with others in a group or organization.

Proactive people work *with* change rather than fight it. They draw important lessons from change so they can use their experience and apply their newfound knowledge to future, similar situations. They also use internal and external resources to cope with change. And, like positive people, proactive people know how to reframe a changing situation to see its opportunities - and so achieve productive results. As noted in the online course, proactive people also are willing to take calculated risks to reach goals.

HOW DO PEOPLE DEMONSTRATE RESILIENCE?

We just talked about five key characteristics of resilience. Now let's look at how people demonstrate resilience in the course of dealing with change.

How would people with low resilience think or behave in the face of significant change? How would people with high resilience think or behave in the same situation? People demonstrate resilience on a continuum, or sequence, as illustrated below - with low resilience to the far left and high resilience to the far right.



Now let's look at some examples of how people's responses to change differ when they have low resilience and high resilience. The following tables include responses categorized under each of the five characteristics of resilience. **Remember:** Low-resilience responses are on the left and high-resilience responses on the right.

Note: Continuum graphic and response tables adapted from: Conner, D. R. (1992). *Managing at the speed of change*. New York: Villard Books.

| Positive | |
|---|--|
| People with <i>low</i> levels of the Positive characteristic: | People with <i>high</i> levels of the Positive characteristic: |
| Interpret the world: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As binary (with two parts) - Everything is one thing or the opposite, e.g., yes or no, right or wrong, black or white - there's nothing "in between." As sequential - Things occur one right after the other. | Interpret the world: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As multi-faceted - Most things have many parts or aspects; they're not one thing or the opposite, but a mix of things, e.g., "the situation is gray." As overlapping - Sometimes different things happen at the same time. |
| Expect the future to be orderly and predictable. | Expect the future to be filled with constantly shifting variables (events and conditions). |
| Interpret disruptions or unmet expectations as resulting from personal vendettas or conspiracies. | View disruptions or unmet expectations as the natural result of a changing world. |
| Spend too much time trying to resolve contradictions and paradoxes (puzzling situations). | Understand that life is filled with contradictions and paradoxes. |
| See major change as uncomfortable and a | Also see major change as uncomfortable, |



| | |
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| situation to avoid. | but understand the opportunities it presents. |
| Feel that most challenges and barriers in life are unfair and serve no purpose. | Believe that lessons can be learned from meeting challenges and overcoming barriers. |
| See life as generally punishing; lack a sense of humor. | See life as generally rewarding; maintain a sense of humor. |

Focused

| People with <i>low</i> levels of the Focused characteristic: | People with <i>high</i> levels of the Focused characteristic: |
|---|---|
| Lack an overarching purpose or vision in life and/or the ability to stay focused on achieving their vision when difficulties occur. | Maintain a strong purpose or vision that gives their life meaning and are able to stay focused on that vision whatever happens along the way. |
| Fail to develop goals (based on their vision), or lose sight of their goals in the face of obstacles or barriers. | Develop goals (based on their vision) and manage problems along the way so they achieve their goals. |

Flexible

| People with <i>low</i> levels of the Flexible characteristic: | People with <i>high</i> levels of the Flexible characteristic: |
|---|---|
| Approach change as a mysterious event. | Believe change is a manageable process. |
| Have a low tolerance for ambiguity (uncertainty) - don't function well in unstructured or uncertain environments. | Have a high tolerance for ambiguity. |
| Need a relatively long recovery time after adversity or disappointment. | Need a relatively short time to recover after adversity or disappointment. |
| Feel victimized during periods of change. | Feel empowered during periods of change. |
| Misjudge their own capabilities and get in "over their heads" trying to manage change. | Recognize their own strengths and weaknesses; know when to accept internal and external limits and so better manage change. |
| Fail to break from established, traditional ways of seeing things. | Challenge and when necessary modify their own assumptions and frames of reference in order to see things in new ways. |
| Fail to develop or maintain nurturing | Develop and rely on nurturing relationships |



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| relationships that can provide support in times of change. | for support. |
| Lack patience and understanding in the face of change. | Display patience and understanding when dealing with change. |

Organized

| People with <i>low</i> levels of the Organized characteristic: | People with <i>high</i> levels of the Organized characteristic: |
|--|--|
| Become lost when confronted with confusing information. | Sort out confusing information in order to identify main issues and underlying themes. |
| Fail to see the common features of what appear to be unrelated issues in dealing with change; duplicate work, which drains their energy. | Identify the common features of what appear to be unrelated issues in dealing with change; consolidate work for efficiency and wise use of their energy. |
| Cannot update or shift priorities as needed in the midst of change. | Renegotiate and re-set priorities as needed during change. |
| Fail to effectively manage tasks and demands that arise at the same time. | Successfully manage tasks and demands that occur at the same time. |
| Cannot compartmentalize (keep separate) pressures and so let stress from one area spill over into another. | Are skilled at compartmentalizing and keeping pressures from affecting other parts of their life. |
| Fail to ask others for help when needed. | Recognize when it's time to ask others for help. |
| Are prone to knee-jerk reactions (immediate reactions based on habit or emotion rather than careful thought). | Act only after careful planning and thought. |

Proactive

| People with <i>low</i> levels of the Proactive characteristic: | People with <i>high</i> levels of the Proactive characteristic: |
|---|--|
| Are unable to recognize when change is inevitable (will occur) or probable (might occur). | Can recognize when change is inevitable or probable - and so prepare for it. |
| Rigidly stick with their usual practices and operating style when facing change and so fail to take advantage of opportunities. | Reframe changing situations, improvise new approaches and take advantage of opportunities. |
| Avoid taking risks, or even examining the | Carefully weigh the pros and cons of taking |



| | |
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| pros and cons of taking risks; also underestimate their ability to handle a situation if something goes wrong. | risks, and – if they conclude a risk is worth taking – proceed to act; also accurately estimate their ability to handle any negative consequences. |
| Go through periods of change without learning how to handle things better the next time. | Draw important lessons from change-related experiences and apply what they learned to future, similar situations. |
| React to disruption by blaming and attacking others. | Respond to disruption by investing energy in problem solving and teamwork. |
| Are unable to influence others to effectively resolve conflicts. | Can influence others to effectively resolve conflicts. |

HOW DO I BECOME MORE RESILIENT?

We have defined resilience and described what it looks like in people. Now you're probably asking, "How do I become more resilient?" As noted, building resilience involves learning and practice.

You need to take what you have learned in this class, and other places, and apply it to your own life until new behaviors, thoughts and actions become habit. That's where practice comes in.

You also need to develop a personal strategy, or plan, for becoming more resilient. You can get help on developing a strategy by reading "The Road to Resilience" on the American Psychological Association website at <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx#>. We strongly urge you to review that website, especially the "10 ways to build resilience." They include:

- Make connections with others.
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.
- Accept that change is part of living.
- Move toward your goals.
- Take decisive actions.
- Look for opportunities for self discovery.
- Nurture a positive view of yourself.
- Keep things in perspective.
- Maintain a hopeful outlook.
- Take care of yourself.
- Try additional ways of strengthening resilience, such as keeping a journal or other forms of reflection such as meditation or prayer.

You might want to write down your personal strategy – including goals and actions to reach them. Make your strategy (or plan) specific to the changes and challenges you're facing in your life, and consider the five characteristics of resilience, too.

For example, let's say you're dealing with sudden job loss. Be intentional about viewing the problem as a highly resilient person who is positive, focused, flexible, organized and proactive would. And start acting like that person as you cope with issues related to your job loss every day.



As we said, pretty soon new behaviors, thoughts and actions will become habit. And you will reap the rewards of greater resiliency.

HOW DO I HELP OTHERS BECOME MORE RESILIENT?

Besides becoming more resilient yourself, you probably want to help your family, friends or colleagues increase their resiliency.

Helping others starts with understanding what they're thinking and feeling. With that in mind, here are some ideas for supporting others as they go through change - and so enable them to become more resilient:

- When confronted with change, people often feel awkward, scared and uncomfortable because they don't know what to expect. Share any factual information you might have with others, as well as "best guesses" about what might happen based on facts (not rumor or speculation). Above all, assure others that you will be there to guide them through the change.
- People often feel alone during a change, even if they're facing it with others. You can help them break out of isolation by structuring activities and situations to increase involvement. Encourage them to share ideas and work together to deal with change.
- Many people focus on what they will lose when change comes. Listen and let them mourn the loss, and then gently steer them to thoughts about benefits or improvements the change will bring.
- Many people think they can handle a lot of change all at once. Help them understand that they won't be able to manage multiple changes without setting priorities on which actions to take immediately and which to take later. Also advise them on setting priorities as needed.
- People facing change are concerned they don't have enough resources (time, money, skills, etc.) to respond to unexpected change or initiate change on their own. Help them with creative problem solving and encourage them to develop a plan of action.
- People are at different levels of readiness for change. Some people adapt relatively quickly, while others need more time. Be patient with those slower to adjust to change. This can be tricky if the nature of the change requires prompt action, so you'll need to find the right balance between gentle encouragement and tough communication of urgency.
- People will revert to old behaviors if they don't stay focused on their goals, whether they're coping with unexpected change or initiating change themselves. You can help by continually reminding them of where they want to be and the importance of working toward those goals every day.

RESOURCES FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

You can find tools for dealing with stress, getting through difficult times, and building resilience on websites and in books at your local library. One **book** we recommend is *Managing at the Speed of Change* by Daryl R. Conner. In addition, check out these two **websites**:

- *The Road to Resilience* - American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx
- The role of resilience in mental and emotional health - Helpguide.org
www.helpguide.org/mental/mental_emotional_health.htm#role

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