

6 Steps to Developing Resilience

By Kimberly Weichel

Many people ask me how we can stay balanced in this ever-changing and more demanding world. My response - we need to build our capacity for resilience, a key skill for our time. Resilience is the process of adapting in the face of adversity—whether it's trauma, tragedy, threats, family and relationship problems, serious health issues, or workplace and financial stressors. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences, often leaving us stronger and able to handle additional stress.

The good news is that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary, and can be learned and developed. We've seen extraordinary resilience after earthquakes, tsunamis, or the September 11 attacks with individuals' efforts to rebuild their lives. Being resilient means the ability to work through difficulty or distress to rebuild and renew. Resilience is a state of mind and involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be developed in anyone.

Resilience gives people the strength to tackle problems head-on, overcome adversity, and move on with their lives. Maintaining a reservoir of resilience is so important to be able to ride those unforeseen ups and downs of life.

Here are some suggestions I've found effective to cultivate a deeper pool of resilience:

- 1) Develop a social network. A social network is important for support and for not feeling alone. This may include involvement in a faith community or other organization. A Harvard University study showed that having strong ties to friends and family is a key determinant to a happy life: “Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives. Those ties protect people from life's discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or genes.”
- 2) Find a sense of purpose. Purpose gives us motivation and direction that can keep us on track and feeling fulfilled and happy, especially important during challenging times. Transcending the self and using our strengths to belong or serve something larger than ourselves, through involvement in a cause for which we have passion, is an important component of happiness.
- 3) Build optimism. Optimism means being grateful for the present moment and looking ahead with hope, knowing that good things will happen in our life. Focusing on what we want rather than worrying about what we fear will help build optimism. The more I can respond with optimism and self-control, the more likely I can lead a productive joy-filled life. A persistent pessimistic mind-set can be a risk factor for depression later in life.
- 4) Embrace change. Change is a constant and part of our everyday life, so embracing it and going with the flow is always a much easier ride than resisting it. While change can create fear, uncertainty, and doubt, it can also open new opportunities. Remaining flexible will help us ride the inevitable waves of change.
- 5) Practice self-care. We are more able to practice resilience when we pay attention to our needs and feelings and establish balance, healthy habits, and regular exercise. These reduce stress, increase joy, and help us deal with situations that require resilience, which becomes even more important after traumatic or stressful life events. Self-care includes forgiving ourselves when we fall short and forgiving others to cut the chains that bind us.

- 6) Develop goals and problem-solving skills. Both short- and long-term goals help us focus our energy and time, keep us forward looking, promote accountability, and enhance fulfillment. Goals help us avoid procrastination and distractions and give us a sense of accomplishment once we achieve them. Likewise, developing problem-solving skills is helpful to respond to problems large and small, which are parts of everyday life.

When dealing with difficult or painful events, I try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context, keeping a long-term perspective and avoiding blowing the event out of proportion. Developing confidence in our ability to solve problems and trusting our instincts helps build resilience. An important part of building resilience for me is compassion for myself and for others. We all make mistakes, say things we wished we hadn't, have hard times, or don't measure up, but our ability to bounce back makes life more meaningful and enjoyable. While we are caring people, we can't let the challenging news distract us from living the life we want. We all will have difficult conversations, feel polarized from others, and get annoyed at policies, but our inner resilience can help us ride these waves of discontent and even be empowered to take positive action.

