

Understanding resilience, its connection to stress and how to cultivate it

In the EU-project BENEFIT, resources are built for strengthening mindfulness and resilience in the European youth. One of the first questions that arise is: what is resilience? It can seem quite intangible. Resilience means having a good ability to deal with stress. Chronic stress is common in today's society and can be detrimental to your health. Everyone can build a more resilient mind and body through working on resilience aspects such as tending to basic personal needs, properly deal with emotions, having social support and a hopeful and optimistic outlook.

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Resilience can be a hard term to grasp, but simply put, it is one's ability to bounce back and get stronger from the hardships that everyone experiences in life. It is a complex combination of competences and is built over time as we deal with the challenges we face. Some need more help and practise with gaining resilience than others. But we all have in common that we, through every challenge we face and see through, we practise and improve at least some aspects of our resilience.

Stress and resilience

There are many stress factors in life. Societal culture promotes a stressful lifestyle, including long and full-packed workdays, technology and bad health habits such as little sleep and exercise and unhealthy food. There are also several life events that we go through that are major contributors to stress, such as deaths, births and health deterioration.

Stress engages the sympathetic nervous system, that is the flight, fight or freeze response. It increases your heart rate and breathing ability, improves your eyesight and slows down processes like digestion and sexual function. This is good short term, if your stress is induced by doing sports or encountering physical danger and you have to run. However, if you are in constant stress from overworking and under sleeping for example, your sympathetic system might be working too much. This can lead to several different issues such as health conditions, mental health issues, digestion issues and sexual dysfunction. Resilience skills will help you to destress and engage the parasympathetic nervous system – the calmness and regulatory system in your body. When you are feeling calm and relaxed, the parasympathetic nervous system steps in and restores digestion, energy and bodily fluids, the resting heart rate and sexual function.

Being resilient means having a less strong stress response to rising issues and also having the skillset to be able to solve issues and travel fast from a sympathetic to a parasympathetic state of the body. That does not only have the above-mentioned physical benefits, but also have wide-reaching mental impact including better concentration, clearer thinking, feeling more open and optimistic about life, oneself and others, having more fun and being better at improvising and solving upcoming issues.

Building block of mental resilience

How we build resilience is a complex subject. The Global Genes study on Resilient Living introduces ten building blocks of mental resilience. These are:

- 1) Practise of self-care – good habits that work for you, e. g. in terms of sleep, diet and exercise.
- 2) Ability to self-replenish – being able to realise when your energy and good mood storages are running low – and how you can fill them up again.
- 3) Emotional expressiveness – awareness of your own basic emotions and the ability to express them in a healthy manner.
- 4) Good thought patterns – awareness of your inner dialogue and the ability to think in positive and helpful ways.
- 5) Optimism – positive expectations of your future and a belief in the solvability of upcoming issues.
- 6) Hope – including goals, willpower, waypower and follow through in combination with the needed flexibility along the way to the goal.
- 7) Hardiness – placing yourself at the centres of control. This includes being committed, taking ownership and seeing challenges as an opportunity to grow.
- 8) Sense of coherence – including meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility or in other words: knowing that life makes sense, there are resources available to manage it and having an understanding of how the world works.
- 9) Social support – network of family, friends and other contacts.
- 10) Ability to self-calm – the ability to align intellect, emotions, actions and word, be self-aware and relax.

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