

Resilience

What Is It?

Resilience can best be understood as a type of response to intense stress. By definition, resilience means “bouncing back” or “returning to form.”

Resilience to stress is not the same as resistance to stress because resistance implies there is no response to stress.

With these definitions in mind, you might think that stress resistance is better than stress resilience. That’s not always the case. Consider the differences between steel and rubber as an example.

A steel bar is resistant to stress and is capable of maintaining its form while bearing large loads. But steel is susceptible to shearing and completely breaking. A rubber brick, on the other hand, will bend easily under even small loads, but it’s extremely difficult to snap or break. Moreover, once the load is removed from the rubber, its flexibility returns it to its original form.

How to Get It and How to Keep It

A scale has been developed by researchers with the National Center for PTSD to rate psychological traits that promote resilience — the ability to undergo stress and still retain mental health and well-being. Called the **Response to Stressful Experiences Scale (RSES)**, the measurement has been tested in more than 1,000 active-duty military personnel.

RSES identifies six factors that are key to psychological resilience:

- Positive outlook
- Spirituality
- Active coping
- Self-confidence
- Learning and making meaning
- Acceptance of limits

Here are suggestions for developing and maintaining resilience in each of these areas:

Positive Outlook

- Use people who are great at dealing with stress as role models.
- Find an opportunity for growth in every stressful situation.
- Calm and comfort yourself.
- Try to recharge before facing the next challenge.
- Find something to laugh about.
- Practice ways to handle a situation better the next time.

I can be proud of who I am.

I can make the world a better place.

I am valuable.

I can grow up to be anything I want.

I can make good choices.

I am intelligent.

I am loveable.

I am somebody important.

Whatever I believe I can achieve.

I do many things well.

I can overcome obstacles.

My smile is a gift to others.

There are many people who care about me.

I am special.

I can think positive thoughts even when life seems negative.

I can forgive myself when I make mistakes.

I am creative.

I can offer kindness to others.

There are places where I feel safe.

I have many talents.

I am smart enough to ask for help when I need it.

My life is full of possibilities.

I can make good choices.

I am likeable.

When I get angry I can calm myself down.

I can be my own best friend.

I am fun to be with.

I am strong.

I know how to be healthy.

I can look for the best in other people and myself.



“To see the benefits of flexibility, just look at the difference between an oak tree and a blade of grass. The oak tree is large and massive, with a strong but rigid trunk and a system of roots and branches. The blade of grass is slight and has a very shallow root system. Yet, in the face of hurricane-force winds, it’s the oak that’s destroyed because the blade of grass is able to bend, deflect and return to form.”

Spirituality

- Pray or meditate.
- Lean on a faith in God or a higher power.
- Rely on a value system or set of guiding life principles.

Active Coping

- Take action to fix things.
- Don’t give up trying to solve problems.
- Find a way to get help when it is needed.
- Face fears.
- Look at a problem in a number of ways.
- Look for creative solutions to the problem.

Self-Confidence

- Expect that you can handle the problem.
- Know that you will bounce back from the stressful situation.

Learning and Making Meaning

- Look for meaning in the experience.
- Find strength in the meaning, purpose or mission of your life.
- Learn important and useful life lessons from an event and learn from past mistakes.
- Understand that bad things can—and do—happen to anyone.

Acceptance of Limits and Circumstances

- Put things in perspective and realize you will have times of joy and times of sadness.
- Be good at determining what situations are changeable and what situations are not.
- Accept things you cannot change.
- Know you have limits.

“Mental flexibility is one of the common denominators of psychologically resilient people,” says Dr. Douglas C. Johnson, head of the Research Facilitation Division at NCCOSC, and one of the co-authors of the resilience scale.

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Mental resilience is a skill you can learn. Start by practicing at least one of the factors identified above. A big bonus: Bolstering one resilience factor usually has the positive effect of boosting other resilience factors, as well.

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