



Fostering resilience

Stress is a significant contributor to poor morale, high staff turnover and reduced productivity. With resilience training, says Gaynor Parkin, both individuals and organisations can learn to cope with stress, and even to thrive.

Despite an apparently improving economic outlook, people's busy and demanding roles mean the workplace is a high-stress environment. For both individuals and organisations, the costs from chronic stress are significant. Stress is widely acknowledged as a significant contributor to poor morale, high staff turnover, and reduced productivity at work.

High stress has also been shown to significantly impair memory and the ability to learn, with associated declines in performance. Reduced productivity and replacement costs make absenteeism a costly consequence of work stress. In addition, a 2007 New Zealand study found that work stress was contributing to high rates of mental illness in employees.

Given these negative consequences, and rapidly changing organisational environments, there is strong interest in how best to foster resilience to stress. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and recover well after stress, adversity or change. Many people describe resilience as “bouncing back”. We see it as more than that—resilience can also be about thriving. The concept of resilience refers to both individual resilience and the broader concept of organisational resilience (see box).

A strong body of scientific research has shown that individual resilience skills can be learned and improved, and also that there are particular tools and strategies which boost resilience. This research is important for organisations as it provides both a rationale for providing, and confidence for investing, in resilience training. Organisational resilience is strongly linked to skilled leadership at both a strategic level and in relation to leading people.

KEY SKILLS, TOOLS AND STRATEGIES LINKED TO RESILIENCE

A key resilience skill for individuals is cognitive reframing or reappraisal. This is the ability to hold on to ‘big picture’ thinking and consider options rather than getting stuck in a particular thinking style or mindset. Being able to view thoughts from different perspectives facilitates the creation of new and more helpful emotions and broader behaviour options. In particular, this skill helps people to view problems and difficulties as challenges rather than threats. Maintaining a broader cognitive repertoire facilitates a greater range of behavioural options, which means someone’s behaviour is more likely to be flexible, rather than rigid.

It is important to note that cognitive reappraisal is not positive thinking. The key is flexibility in thinking. In some situations, rigid positive thinking (“This will all be fine, everything will go well”) can be just as unhelpful as very negative thinking (“Nothing will work, everything will go wrong”). In contrast, flexibility in thinking allows options and more nimble responses when things don’t go as planned.

A complementary skill is realistic optimism. This is the cognitive skill of remaining hopeful when things are difficult, and taking action to resolve problems. It is not being naively optimistic about situations that may be complex and challenging, but it is deciding that doing what is possible and expecting it to turn out well are more productive than lapsing into pessimism and feeling there’s nothing at all that can be done.

Numerous research studies, including the work of Martin Seligman, have demonstrated that people who use optimism as their key ‘explanatory style’ are more likely to recover well from stressful experiences and difficult life events. Our explanatory style is our habitual way of explaining to ourselves the things that happen to

ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

- Meet key objectives while facing challenges
- Respond positively to change
- Adapt and recover faster from adversity
- Thrive successfully during transitions
- Turn crises into opportunities

us, and around us, and can include the less helpful habits of pessimism, blame and judgement (“This organisational change will be a disaster, it’s all bad, and bad things always happen to me”).

Another important tool for improving resilience is ‘mindfulness’ skills. Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to what is happening in and around us in a conscious and purposeful way. Mindfulness is the antithesis of going through one’s day on autopilot. A wealth of research data exists to demonstrate numerous benefits of mindfulness practice, including improved physical health, attention, concentration and working memory.

There is a strong link between mindfulness practice, improved emotion regulation (that is, the ability to manage your feelings) and self-control, plus the ability to ‘let go’ of negative or unhelpful thoughts so there is less of a negative impact on mood and reactions. As with cognitive flexibility, mindfulness is a skill that can be trained and improves with practise.

Experiencing positive emotions is a further key resilience skill. Research by Professor Barbara Fredrickson and others has demonstrated that positive emotions counteract feelings of stress and negative emotions like frustration, worry and sadness, assist in physiological recovery from stress, and improve innovation and creativity.

Importantly for organisations, shared positive emotions in teams that develop from collaborative work have been shown to have numerous benefits. These include a broadening in attention processes, which facilitates more cognitively and behaviourally complex responses. Work by Fred Luthans has shown that such benefits seem to flow on to improvements in performance, even measured at the team and organisational levels. Also, for the many New Zealand organisations experiencing significant organisational change, having employees being open and receptive to feeling positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, satisfaction and hope, helps contribute to optimism and flexibility about change.

Maintaining at least a moderate level of physical fitness is a further essential resilience skill. There are endless studies indicating a positive association between physical fitness and stress resilience.

TIPS FOR RECHARGING YOUR BATTERIES

HR leaders often prioritise employee well-being over their own—here are some reminders for yourself:

1. **Sleep more**—plan ahead on nights with no social engagements and get to bed at a reasonable time. Use relaxation exercises, baths, herbal teas and light reading to wind yourself down ready for a deep sleep.
2. **Eat well**—choose the most nutritious foods you can as often as you can. Carry plenty of high-nutrient, energy-enhancing snacks with you and stay away from the processed energy-sapping choices.
3. **Move more**—be as active as you can, as often as you can. Plan to meet friends for a walk, swim, jog or dance class. Ask colleagues to join you for fresh air breaks. Reward yourself for extra effort and aim to do something every day even if you don't feel like it.
4. **Watch the caffeine and alcohol**—it's so easy to grab more of these when tiredness hits. Experiment with alternatives, maybe a yoghurt smoothie instead of another coffee, or a non-alcoholic cocktail rather than wine.
5. **Plan activities that replenish you**—make time to have a snooze in the sunshine, chat with a friend who makes you laugh, do something fun, walk beside the sea, enjoy your favourite hobby.
6. **Deliberately move more slowly**—notice the urge to rush and resist it. Give yourself permission to pause.
7. **Pay attention to your breathing**—check you are breathing from your diaphragm (belly breathing), not your chest. This helps to keep your body and mind in a calm state rather than a frantic one.
8. **Practice gratitude**—make a mental note or write down three things you are grateful for each day. Reflect on these and notice how you feel when you are being grateful. What else helps you experience more positive emotion?

This research demonstrates that people who are physically fit recover more quickly from exposure to stress, are less prone to worry, have improved concentration and memory, and sleep better. Exercise also stimulates the production of endorphins, the neurochemicals that increase a sense of well-being and positive mood.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF RESILIENCE TRAINING?

For individuals, learning that how they respond under stress is 'normal' and understandable is a key benefit of resilience training. And even more helpful is hearing a positive message that they can improve that 'normal' way they cope and respond to stress, even when they are in organisational environments that are high-

ly pressured and experiencing rapid change. Sharing a common language to frame responses to stress is also helpful. Likewise, learning resilience skills in a team can support team building and again help teams develop processes to strengthen individual and team resilience.

Recently, I heard an example from a team reporting back on resilience training. They noted that they had all got stuck in some rigid thinking styles while discussing a particularly challenging project. A couple of team members identified this, reminded the team about flexible thinking and they were able to generate some more flexible ideas and, therefore, options for action.

Another benefit of building resilience at both an individual and organisational level is the beneficial impact on productivity. Research by Margaret Greenberg and Senia Maymin in 2013 identified that the three biggest drains on productivity were overwork, multi-tasking or 'flip flopping' between tasks, and procrastination. These behaviours are often a direct consequence of people feeling overwhelmed by work stress and responding in high adrenalin mode.

In contrast, when people are actively using resilience skills, they are more likely to feel calm (and other positive emotions), to generate more creative and innovative solutions, to be able to 'think outside the square', focus clearly on tasks, and maintain concentration. These higher level cognitive abilities are managed by the prefrontal cortex, the executive functioning centre of our brains. This functioning is enhanced by resilience skills such as mindfulness, flexible thinking, positive emotion and physical fitness.

Working effectively for specific periods of time then scheduling recovery time or time away from work is often another goal of resilience training, and a habit that people are more likely to maintain when they are actively using resilience skills. Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow's research has found that scheduling time off, rather than just working more hours, actually boosted individual and organisational productivity.

SOME CAVEATS

For resilience training to be effective, follow-up is key. Learning resilience skills is the beginning not the end of the process. People need support and reminders to continue to practice the skills and integrate them into their daily working lives. Organisational systems and frameworks to support the application of the skills are also essential. For example, senior leaders need to model resilience competencies and show how to plan for recovery times, as well as sustained performance, with important projects.

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