

Balance and Bounce

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We spend our careers advocating and caring for others, spending much of our energy on those around us and investing too little time in ourselves.

We seldom put ourselves first or ponder how unbalanced our lives may be.

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. We suffer from lack of sleep, over committed schedules, and daily workplace stressors. We frequently strive for perfection, deny our needs and feelings, assume responsibility for others' actions, and deny ourselves play and personal time.

Many of us believe that since we are well educated, knowledgeable about mental and emotional struggles, and skilled at helping others, we are somehow immune to our own struggles. We may feel we should be able to overcome our own personal difficulties without outside help.

Yet, research shows conclusively that taking care of ourselves has a measurable impact on our performance at work, on our general sense of well-being, and on our future health and happiness.^{1,2}

It is difficult to maintain our balance and emotional resiliency when things can be unpredictable and often in crisis mode. Certainly, it is much easier to be positive and adhere to useful habits when life is going smoothly. Yet, bad things can happen. And sometimes those bad things are not just minor, irritating issues, but life-changing setbacks that cause extreme stress and are a threat to our well-being. Although we may react with strong emotions and uncertainty, most of us generally adapt well to life-changing situations and stressful conditions if given enough time and support.

Others seem to only focus on the problems and issues. They worry and fret, leading to feelings of despair and depression. They lack energy and foresight and may quit trying to find solutions. This can lead to a negative spiral of hopelessness and defeat.^{1,2}

Although it is now widely recognized that healthcare providers often experience specific stress symptoms as a result of the nature of their work, coping with this work-related stress often remains largely the responsibility of the providers themselves.²⁻⁴ Fortunately, more and more individuals and organizations are recognizing the value of wellness and taking steps toward a more balanced work-life scenario.

Research shows people cope with trauma/crisis primarily by: 1) active coping or taking action that matters to address the difficulty; 2) reappraisal, conducting an internal assessment to make sense of the adversity; or, 3) avoidance coping, the blunting of emotional impact by avoiding the difficulty itself, either by distractions or by abusing drugs/alcohol. Optimists tend to alternate between the first two coping styles, while pessimists tend to use the third.^{1,2}

Resilience in the Face of Difficulty

Being resilient in body, mind, and spirit is the key to being happy and successful. Emotionally, it is about being positive. Physically, it can translate to strength and flexibility. Spiritually it indicates the ability to maintain hope in tumultuous times. It's about staying centered and grounded and making good choices.

Resilience can be thought of as our ability to bounce back, or even grow, in the face of pressures and threats. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the ability to adapt in the face of adversity, trauma, or tragedy. Resilience can also be described as a combination of abilities and characteristics that interact dynamically to allow an individual to bounce back, cope successfully, and function above the norm in spite of significant stress or adversity.⁵

It is believed that some people are genetically better able to handle the stresses of life and to bounce back from difficulties. Although there may be a genetic component to resilience, it can be learned, and people can become more resilient through fostering certain attitudes and behaviors described as protective factors. (Table) While some of these abilities are innate, many are developed or enhanced by exposure to supportive people and environments.²

Positive Actions Supporting Resilience

1. Build Positive Beliefs in Your Abilities
2. Find a Sense of Purpose in Your Life
3. Develop a Strong Social Network
4. Embrace Change
5. Be Optimistic
6. Nurture Yourself
7. Develop Your Problem-Solving Skills
8. Establish Goals
9. Take Steps to Solve Problems

Researchers in the field of "positive psychology" have been studying resilience. Positive psychology examines how people develop traits associated with emotional strength and the ability to bounce back when faced with failure, loss, or other obstacles. Resilient people have an attitude of flexibility toward their personal and professional goals that seems to be grounded in a set of beliefs that help them to maintain perspective when life throws them a curve.^{1,2}

Although everyone has the potential for resilience, interaction between the individual and environmental factors is responsible for the level of resilience. Risk factors stem from multiple life stressors, a single traumatic event, or cumulative stress from a number of individ-

ual and environmental factors. Individuals facing more stress or risk factors than the number of protective factors available to them may be overwhelmed and develop symptoms of emotional or physical stress. A positive balance between risk and protective factors supports emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Strengthening these areas strengthens your resilience, enabling you to bounce back from the snags and pitfalls of life.

Resilience may take time to build and varies from one person to the next. The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you. A critical element for handling pressure lies in your thinking! Your thinking triggers your emotions, which then influence your behavior. Much stress can be attributed to our perceptions of events, and how we process what we're experiencing.⁴ You always have some choices in any situation—even if you don't like the choices available at the moment; even if the only change you can make is in your attitude.

A scale developed by researchers with the National Center for Post-Traumatic- Stress Disorder (PTSD) rates psychological traits that promote resilience and well-being. The Response to Stressful Experiences Scale (RSES) has been tested in active-duty military personnel, nurses, and medical residents. The RSES identifies six key factors to psychological resilience: 1) positive outlook, 2) spirituality, 3) active coping, 4) self-confidence, 5) learning and making meaning, and 6) acceptance of limits.⁶

Taking Care of Ourselves

Why is resilience important? Risks to personal and professional wellness are inherent in the work we do and in the personal characteristics that make us successful. Fortunately, strategies for monitoring and maintaining wellness are also well known. Ultimately, the care that we provide others will be only as good as the care we provide ourselves.

Taking good care of your mind, body, and spirit is one of the few areas where you have full control over what you choose to do, when you choose to do it, and the results you eventually create for yourself. Strengthening resilience is an effective tool for professional self-care, an essential component to quality practices, and is critical to the sustainability and growth of the profession.

Balance between personal and professional life is essential. Many practitioners feel guilty about engaging in leisure time and forget how to relax and play. Difficulty with self-nurturing leads many practitioners to alternative nurturing activities such as substance abuse and other negative behaviors. Stress and negative activities have also been shown to have particular relevance to the healthcare field, reflected in poor provider performance.²

Studies in the emerging positive psychology movement are increasing awareness on the relative importance that positive psychological strengths and capacities such as optimism can have on human functioning.^{1,2} Optimism has been linked to perseverance, achieve-

*Out of clutter, find simplicity.
From discord find harmony. In
the middle of difficulty lies
opportunity.*

Albert Einstein

ment, health, and happiness.

Being resilient does not mean that individuals are problem-free or unaffected by difficulties. It does mean drawing on personal beliefs, behaviors, skills, and attitudes to move through stress, trauma, and tragedy rather than succumb to them. It means emerging from stressful situations feeling normal and perhaps even stronger than before.

The ongoing challenges faced by the healthcare industry are immense. In this time of unprecedented change, as caregivers, we need even greater skill in responding positively, flexibly, and creatively to the unexpected events cascading through our lives and workplaces.

Resilience involves maintaining balance in your life as you deal with stressful circumstances and traumatic events. To bounce means stepping forward to take action and also stepping back to rest. It is spending time with others to gain support and encouragement. It means trusting yourself, relying on others, and being mindful and attentive to your self-care.

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