

# Resilience

## Introduction

In the gamut of everyday life, personal tragedies and life stresses can affect us from severe illnesses such as cancer or heart disease, death, loss of job and financial challenges up to natural disasters such as Hurricane Kristina.

As lawyers, we deal with situations that can try us and push our patience to the limit. It could be the trial from hell with uncooperative clients and witnesses expecting an unrealistic result. It could be dealing with the facts and human tragedy of a violent crime. You could be the real estate lawyer who has many closings on a Friday before a long weekend who has discovered title problems and the other lawyer will not call back; at the same time, your clients are demanding their keys as the clock is ticking on the moving van rental. A corporate lawyer can be involved in a nasty shareholders' dispute with neither side willing to mediate. Even in a relatively calm estate practice, family conflict can lead to will challenges and the airing of dirty laundry in public.

Some people actually thrive in these situations. However, others do not. You know when balance has been lost when your feelings overwhelm you negatively. When you are in the middle of one or more of these kinds of situations and you are not coping well, how do you feel? Likely, you are tired. Actually, you are probably exhausted physically and emotionally. You may feel frustrated that things are going so poorly. Feelings of sadness and distress overwhelm you. Anger enters the picture as well.

## Defining Resilience

So, how do we define the ability to thrive in challenging situations? Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant amounts of stress. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences.

Research is demonstrating a positive connection between resilience and positive health and well being. Resilient people do the following things:

- Talk to themselves in positive and self-enhancing ways. They are able to find satisfaction in their successes and believe that success comes from action not luck
- Take a break when stress starts to mount
- Keep sight of the big picture and consider how their actions will impact others
- Work hard on building strong communication skills
- Accept others and themselves – warts and all
- Balance time alone with being with others
- Take the time to see the world through the eyes of others
- Avoid reacting to situations impulsively or with anger; take the time to understand the situation so that they can respond with thoughtfulness, self-discipline and control; strive to achieve excellence, not perfection
- Take the time to care for themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually; seek a balanced life that includes time for family, friends, leisure and pleasure

- Set personal goals – both short-term and long-term; plan time and effort to achieve them.

Some of the obstacles to resilience are:

- Negative expectations and scripts – after doing something well and successfully, one person will accept that the kudos are well earned while another will feel that they were just lucky
- Choosing to be stressed out rather than stress hardy
- Seeing life's perspective in the narrow "me" lens
- Poor communication
- Judgmental thinking and non-acceptance of others
- Isolation
- Lack of compassion
- Handling mistakes by overreacting, anger or by perfectionist all or nothing thinking
- No discipline or self control so that thoughts and actions are arbitrary or impulsive
- No self-care physically, emotionally and spiritually
- Having no long-term or short-term goals

### **The Resilient Person**

What does a resilient person look like? The Mood Disorders Society of Canada ([www.mooddisorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca)) and Neasa Martin of Neasa Martin Associates in Toronto have listed common qualities for resilient people as follows :

- They seek ways to become independent
- They take charge and make changes when life makes them unhappy
- They learn from their experiences – good and bad
- They find opportunities in a crisis and focus on solving problems
- They are able to find meaning and purpose in the problems they face
- They seek out people who support them and provide them with a good example of how to cope
- They are able to laugh at themselves and find humour in their situation
- They have the moral courage to do the right thing even if it makes them unpopular

### **A Call to Action and Self Education**

The good news is that resilience can be learned. Here are some tips to make yourself better able to handle the demands and crises life holds for you.

- 1. Connect With Others** – Maintaining good relationships with family and friends gives you a foundation in any and all of life's curves. Seek out people who are supportive and respectful and take care to avoid those who are critical and controlling. Accepting help from others while having the ability to help yourself

gives you a depth of contact in which you can get the support you need while, at the same time, getting fulfillment in helping others. Being part of a faith group can assist with your spiritual grounding and growth. Being part of a self-help group can give you emotional support.

**2. Seeing Crises as Solvable Problems** – You cannot change that fact that highly-stressful events happen but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. As one of the Emotional Intelligence components, self-discipline and self-control help us with predictability, consistency, openness, flexibility and spontaneity. Having short-term and long-term goals helps us to rewrite negative thoughts and put structure and control into our lives. Learning how to deal with negative feelings, which we all get, will help us to avoid lapses of judgment that prevent us from coping.

**3. Accepting Oneself and Others** – As Brooks and Goldstein wrote in “*The Power of Resilience*”, Contemporary Books, 2004, “Accepting implies possessing realistic expectations and goals, recognizing our strengths as well as our vulnerabilities, and leading an authentic, balanced life in which our behaviors are in accord with our values and goals.” People who are not authentic or balanced or whose lives do not reflect their values, experience increased stress and pressure. This discrepancy leads to a lack of integrity and a reduced possibility of a leading a fulfilling life.

This dichotomy can be illustrated by the person who says that his or her family is the most important thing in their life but who, in reality, spends very little time at home for meals, bedtime stories or family vacations. This person is only fooling him/herself as they live differently to his/her stated values.

**4. Communicating Effectively** – Communication is linked to empathy. To be an effective communicator, there must be an appreciation of verbal and non-verbal messages and our capacity for active listening. When we listen actively, we attempt to understand and validate, although not necessarily agree with, other people. Not being able to communicate with others leads to anger, conflict and increased stress with little in the way of resources for resilience.

**5. Nurturing a Positive View of Yourself and Taking Care of Yourself Physically, Emotionally and Spiritually** – To be able to roll with the punches, believing in yourself and your ability to cope puts you in good stead for the times that things go terribly wrong. Evaluate your strengths. You may be a good speaker but a lousy writer. You may handle big stress well but cannot handle small details. Figure out your strengths and topload yourself for success knowing what areas you are weak in and need help while focusing on those strengths.

Take care of yourself. Get eight hours of sleep a night. Eat three meals a day. Exercise. Cut down or cut out caffeine and smoking. Have a close, non-judgmental friend to share your ideas, hopes and dreams with. Laugh a lot. Feed your soul with activities that make your spirits soar be it painting, theatre, golf or reading. Get a pet – that way, some one will always be happy to see you come home!

**6. Dealing Effectively With Mistakes** – Resilient persons look at mistakes as experiences and opportunities for learning and growth. Even though they do not enjoy mistakes, they are not easily discouraged by them. People lacking resilience perceive mistakes as evidence that they are failures and lack intelligence. They make excuses, avoid, deny or blame others when a mistake occurs.

If you believe that you cannot learn from “mistakes” because there is nothing you can change from the experience, you will avoid challenges and resort to the earlier-mentioned counterproductive coping behaviors. As Brooks and Goldstein state in *“The Power of Resilience”*, supra – “The more you run from success, the less likely you are to experience success, and the greater probability you will continue down a path marked by insecurity, anger and sadness.”

### **Conclusion**

Resilience can be learned and is well worth the effort. Self-awareness, reading books about the subject such as *The Power of Resilience* listed earlier, internet sites such as [www.mooodisorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooodisorderscanada.ca) and googling the topic to search the internet can give you resources at your fingertips for help and education. If you feel weighed down with the burden of your life and the challenges it offers to you, struggle with anxiety or depression or are using alcohol or drugs to cope, consider getting professional help.

Please devote some time to help yourself. You are worth it!

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