

## Fact Sheet – Personal resilience

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### Introduction

Only learning to adapt by looking after your own resilience will put you in a position to help others through change

Why do some people appear to adapt to stressful situations better than others? Why do some recover from adverse experiences when others don't, and cope with high work demands more successfully? And why do some seem to deal better with change?

This is the topic of resilience. Five or six years ago, the subject filled the shelves of bookshops everywhere. Then it seemed that resilience might just be another management fad, a rebranding of stress management. Interest in the subject, however, has not waned and leaders and HR professionals alike are wondering how best to thrive in our complex and turbulent world.

### Myths about resilience

The term 'resilience' can bring to mind some unhelpful myths. These include:

#### **You are either resilient or you are not**

There is a tendency to label individuals as resilient or not. While there is research to suggest that we may all differ to some extent in our relative vulnerability to stress (as a result of our genetic inheritance), there is growing evidence that resilience is a dynamic and interactive process. In other words, we can, by our own actions and how we engage with our environment, influence our level of resilience. Current estimates would suggest that 50%-70% of our behaviour is the result of how we engage with the world around us.

Our capacity for resilience also varies across time and space. We are likely to be more resilient in some areas and times of our lives than we are in others. It can be instructive for one's self-development to reflect on times when we have been resilient and to ask ourselves what we did that helped us in the face of challenging circumstances. This can help us connect with our capabilities for resilience.

#### **Resilience as invulnerability**

Resilience can also sometimes be characterised in popular discourse as some form of superhuman strength; that someone is, in a sense, unbreakable, incapable of being hurt. This is unhelpful. It runs contrary to the vulnerability of human nature and does not allow for recognising, accepting and managing our emotions. Anyone fitting this description of the superman or woman impregnable to attack is likely to be either a psychopath or in danger of derailing as a result of suppressed emotions.

#### **Resilience is about bouncing back**

A further unhelpful myth is that of resilience as bouncing back. Resilience can take many shapes, and in some circumstances this may mean returning to previous levels of functioning after a period of difficulty – resilience can also be about transformational growth, a felt sense of greater purpose, strength or investment in life as a result of experiencing significant challenge or adversity. Richard Tedeschi's work on post-traumatic growth theory has outlined several ways in which individuals encountering adversity report a sense of greater meaning and value in life, work and personal relations.

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### A new resilience model

Based on an extensive review of the academic literature from fields as diverse as developmental psychology and neuroscience, and a survey of more than 1,000 managers, the team at Roffey Park have developed a statistically robust model of resilience built on five key capabilities.

These five dimensions of the resilience model below, and offer some questions and practical tips to aid individuals in thinking about their own resilience. They have also made available a Resilience Capability Index (RCI) that employees can complete to assess their current resilience capability across the five dimensions of our model. Our intention is to help leaders, and those they lead, to be aware of and develop their own potential for resilience.



Modern definition of resilience

### VISION

**The most important of the domains**, Vision is about your sense of purpose, goals, and personal vision for yourself. The reason this is the most important domain is that all other domains are guided by what it is you want to achieve. Having clarity in this domain allows you to be decisive when facing tough choices, and to maintain perspective when facing challenges. Whether your goals relate to family, to work, or a side project, what's important is being specific and clear.

**Clarity keeps you focused.** It's easy to get distracted by unimportant details and events if you don't have anything specific, you're working towards. After all, it's not like you had anything else planned, so why not binge on the new season of House of Cards? Vision is about having clarity so that when things get tough, you know what's important and what isn't in order to stay focused and achieve your goals.

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**Congruence is the name of the game.** Congruence means all your actions are working together across your larger vision of yourself and sense of purpose, through medium and short terms goals. When you don't have clarity on these, it's likely that some of your goals may conflict with each other, resulting in frustration as moving towards one goal moves you further from the other. Instead, if your actions are aligned, everything you do slowly moves you towards your ultimate goals, helping you achieve feats that others deemed impossible.

### COMPOSURE

**It's about regulating emotions.** The fight-or-flight response of the brain loves to flare up when facing conflict or hearing about a sudden change at work. But being able to overcome that instinctive emotional response and maintain your composure often means being able to recognise hidden opportunities and solve problems in novel ways. This is because becoming emotional prevents you from properly accessing your ability to think critically.

**It's also the little things.** Composure is not just the big crises that we face, but also the little everyday things. Getting emotional in a traffic jam is never useful, so why bother getting worked up? Maintaining composure means keeping calm so you can save your energy for what is important.

**Interpretation bias is important.** Your boss walks up to you and says, "I need to talk to you. Come see me later". Do you panic? Do you worry about getting into trouble for something or getting fired? The statement from your boss in this example is neutral with no direct implied negativity. It could just as easily be good news! Research shows that a natural inclination to negatively interpret ambiguous situations makes people six times more likely to show symptoms of depression, while a positive interpretation bias results in higher resilience.

You also need to **be proactive**. Composure is not just about being able to return to a state of poise, but also about considering your own beliefs and expectations that produce emotions in the first place. For example, if you expect that nothing will ever go wrong with your project, then you're likely in for a big shock. Compare that with a healthier belief that, most likely, something will go wrong, and when it does, you'll manage it. It's easy – just expect that everything will be harder than you expect!

### REASONING

**Creativity and innovative problem solving** is incredibly useful when facing challenges along the way. This is what the Reasoning domain is all about. This domain needs Composure for you to keep your cool, as well as Vision so you know what goals to direct your actions toward.

**Anticipate and plan.** Like Composure, it's not just about applying critical thinking during a crisis, but also about acting ahead of time to prevent things from going wrong in the first place. In fact, it's mostly about proactive action. This is like going to the dentist regularly, so you won't need a root canal later. Think proactively through how things may go wrong and act ahead of time to prevent or minimise impact and think through how you'll deal with different scenarios.

**Be resourceful.** Having the right information, tools, techniques, and people available to you will help you solve problems more effectively and find more efficient ways to reach your goals. Resourcefulness is a skill we need to actively build, and the more resourceful we are, the easier it becomes to make unusual connections and find innovative ways forward.

**See opportunity in change.** A high Reasoning ability means that a changing environment is welcome since it always brings hidden opportunities. By maintaining your composure and knowing what you

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want to achieve, change is no longer a threat, and you can look for things that others might have missed, helping you to succeed.

### TENACITY

**Persistence is the key.** Einstein pointed out the importance of persistence for success when he said that “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer”. In a globalised world, success is no longer a given. We need to be willing to work hard and smart and stay with a problem if we hope to achieve something, especially if you want to achieve something that no one else has.

**Learn from mistakes.** Rarely will we do things right the first time. And even when doing something we know well, eventually we will make mistakes. At home, with friends, at work. Mistakes creep in everywhere, so what is important is how we react to mistakes. Admonishing ourselves doesn’t help. Instead, it’s important to be able to objectively look at our mistakes, find lessons in them, and not define ourselves by them. The past is there to be learned from, not to dwell on.

**Don’t be naive,** have realistic optimism. Research shows that people who are overly optimistic about succeeding are less likely to since they tend to give up at the first sign of trouble. What is more useful for success is to have a sense of ‘realistic optimism’, meaning that you are hopeful about your ability to succeed, but you realise that the road will be tough and full of challenges. This realisation combined with the willingness to be persistent is what ultimately leads to success for individuals, teams, and organisations.

### COLLABORATION

**We are social beings.** The brain has a deep fundamental need for connection with others to be able to thrive. The brain has dedicated neural structures to recognise facial expressions, while mirror neurons fire within the brain to help us empathise with others. We are, after all, in this together, so what we do and focus on is not just for us, but to help our communities together and improve our world. This connection is what the Collaboration domain is about.

**Support and be supported.** In a complex world, few of us can achieve anything meaningful alone, so it’s crucial for us to build support networks so we can both have a safety net and be that safety net for others. Interestingly, research shows that when it comes to peace of mind, it’s not actual available support that matters, but instead it is the perception of available support that’s important. So even if you have 100 people ready to support you, if you don’t realise this, you will not feel supported. Keep this in mind for others as well and show the people you care for that you are there to support them whenever they need you.

**Get the context right.** A key part of Collaboration is understanding the context of your interaction with people. Having a meeting with people at work and spending time with friends on the weekend are two very different contexts. For example, at work it’s more important to focus on facts than on emotion, keep things professional and don’t take anything personally. At home, it’s not always about the facts, but very important to address emotions as it’s a vital part of maintaining healthy relationships. Scoring high in Collaboration means being able to know what behaviour is best in different contexts so you can keep things constructive and build positive relationships.

### HEALTH

**The foundational domain.** Good health means looking after your body through what you eat, doing exercise, and getting quality sleep. A healthy body provides a strong foundation for your own resilience

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so you can focus on your sense of purpose and goals. Good health is not the goal itself, but instead is an enabler to achieve your larger personal vision.

**Healthy nutrition.** It's not just about keeping lean, as nutrition also affects your brain health and mental performance. Regularly eating foods with a high combination of fats and sugars (like chocolate, ice cream, cookies, baked goods, burgers...) reduces the chemical in the brain that produces more brain cells. This makes the brain less plastic and reduces your mental adaptability.

**Quality sleep.** Lack of sleep results in more mistakes, reduced attention span, and a decreased ability to deal with stress. It also increases cortisol, the brain's stress hormone. The affects add up over time, compounding the toll on your body, brain, and performance. Sleep makes a big difference, but it's not just about quantity, it's about getting enough quality sleep.

**Regular exercise.** Also, not just about being fit, regular exercise is proven to increase mental performance and increasing your ability to learn. It also protects against neurodegenerative diseases in the long term. So even if you are happy with your body, exercise is still crucial!

What's great about these domains is we absolutely have the capacity to build and improve every domain, and therefore develop our own resilience. Resilience is a life-long and ongoing journey for us and our effort here improves quality of life and directly contributes to the achievement of personal and organisational goals.

