Q: I really want to become a stronger person. What can I do to build resilience in myself?

A: Two things that we can always count on in life is that it is ever-changing and ever-challenging. There will be ongoing periods of joy and contentment followed by painful and challenging experiences. Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover from the difficulties that you face.

It might be easily confused with strength or optimism; however, improving resiliency is about more than courage and your outlook on life. Resilience can be strengthened by cultivating a certain set of qualities within yourself that will improve the way you navigate life’s challenges. Everyone experiences painful times in life, and how you respond to those experiences is what defines your resilience.

Your ability to bounce back from difficult experiences will likely improve if you begin to practice and cultivate the following skills.

1. Acceptance: Acceptance is the ability to let go of what you cannot control. A tendency that many people have is to cling to the aspects of life we perceive as “good” and push away or avoid the aspects of life we perceive as “bad.” If you can let go of how you wish things would be and accept them as they are, you can then choose how you respond in difficult moments. This leads to increased flexibility and self-compassion.

2. Find meaning: Take some time to reflect on what is most meaningful to you in life and what you believe is the deep purpose of your life.

Researcher Richard Davidson, PhD, believes temperament is about more than genetics or circumstances. He views well-being – the ability to be happy and healthy while contending with life’s slings and arrows – as a skill. “Like playing the violin,” he says.

And, like playing the violin, it’s something we can learn.

Neuroscientists once assumed that our brains were largely fixed by adulthood, but today we know that the brain “changes in response to experience and in response to training,” Davidson says. Repetitive experiences, whether chosen or happenstance, modify our brains.

Davidson’s research as a professor of psychology and psychiatry has revealed four traits – resilience, positive outlook, focus, and generosity – that contribute to our ability to be well. By following the strategies outlined below, we can train our brains to be well.

**RESILIENCE**

“One important constituent of well-being is the ability to rapidly recover from adversity,” says Davidson.

Meditation improves resilience, but is not the only tool. A firm sense of purpose can also help you reframe stressful situations. For example, a writer who’s deeply committed to her craft can usually accept rejection slips calmly. Her purpose is writing, not receiving praise from publishers.

“Cognitive reappraisal training” also helps build resilience: Asking appraising questions – “The car is totaled, but are we really financially ruined?” – engages the prefrontal cortex. Over time, this strengthens the brain’s capacity to maintain perspective.

**POSITIVE OUTLOOK**

Having a positive perspective doesn’t mean pretending things are fine when they’re really not. It’s the ability to savor positive experiences and trust the fundamental goodness of others.

Developing a more positive outlook can be as simple as slowing down and deliberately savoring positive experiences, such as lingering over a great meal or reminiscing about a wonderful concert or film after it ends.

Each time we do this, Davidson explains, it allows the brain to sustain activity in the ventral striatum, an area associated with reward. As the circuits in this part of the brain grow stronger, we spend less time searching for pleasure and more time feeling content.
HOW RESILIENT ARE YOU?

Resilience is the process of adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. This quiz was adapted from the book “The Resiliency Advantage,” by Al Siebert, PhD. Rate yourself from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree):

___ I’m usually optimistic. I see difficulties as temporary and expect to overcome them.
 ___ Feelings of anger, loss and discouragement don’t last long.
 ___ I can tolerate high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty about situations.
 ___ I adapt quickly to new developments.
 ___ I’m curious. I ask questions.
 ___ I’m playful. I find the humor in rough situations, and can laugh at myself.

Less than 20: Low Resilience – You may have trouble handling pressure or setbacks, and may feel deeply hurt by any criticism. When things don’t go well, you may feel helpless and without hope. Consider seeking some professional counsel or support in developing your resiliency skills.

20-30: Some Resilience – You have some valuable pro-resiliency skills, but also plenty of room for improvement.

30-35: Adequate Resilience – You are a self-motivated learner who recovers well from most challenges.

35-45: Highly Resilient – You bounce back well from life’s setbacks and can thrive even under pressure. You could be of service to others who are trying to cope better with adversity.

Wellness, From Front

FOCUS

Multitasking is a modern phenomenon. We check our phones, scan social media, and have half-present conversations, all at once. Studies have found this lack of focus can make us unhappy.

Mindfulness meditation “educates” the attention, which can be enormously beneficial. Meditation builds mental focus by training the mind to stay present with a chosen object, like a mantra or the breath. One easy practice is to time your inhale and exhale. Inhale four counts; exhale eight. Do this 10 times. (This practice also helps calm anxiety.)

Another simple focus builder is to practice monotasking — doing one thing at a time. When you check social media, only check social media. When you have a conversation with someone, only listen to her. This practice helps develop focus, and it increases your satisfaction with the present moment.

GENEROSITY

Becoming more generous to others is one of the easiest ways to improve your own well-being.

“The most effective way to activate circuits in the brain associated with well-being and positive emotion is through generosity, and the data are really strong,” says Davidson.

We often associate generosity with material giving, but it doesn’t require robust finances. Choosing to forgive someone who has hurt your feelings and cutting someone a little slack when she needs it are also forms of generosity.

This is an edited version of an article that originally appeared at https://experiencelife.com

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