

Resilience at work

Hilary Coldicott and **Sarah Cook** share their ideas on how to build your resilience both at home and at work

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”
Nelson Mandela

We know that often our greatest learning is when things ‘go wrong’. Often those are also the times when we need to call on all our inner strength to get back up and start again! In our work and home lives we increasingly need high levels of resilience to manage difficult situations effectively and cope with change.

In this article we will share some techniques with you that could help you increase your resilience and transform the way you choose to use your time and energy at work and at home. We have successfully applied these tools across a wide number of businesses with executives and senior leaders as well as front line managers to help build resilience.

Raising awareness

Understanding the nature of resilience and how we can build it will help us, not just when things go wrong but also can assist us every day to ensure we are strong enough emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually to face challenges at work and home. We will discuss how you can discover your own level of resilience, how to identify your strengths and gaps with regard to your ability to face challenging situations.

To help develop resilience it is useful to understand:

- Where our resilience comes from, how it impacts our being, doing, thinking and feeling, and
- How we can build our resilience through the use of practical techniques so we are operating at our personal best.

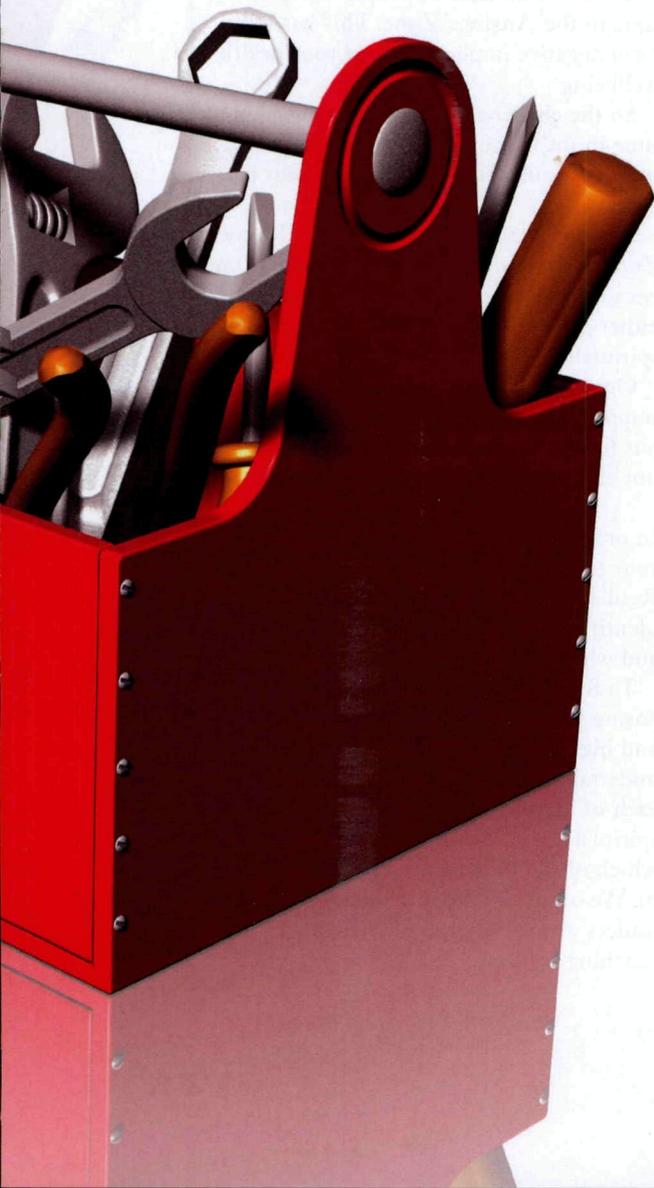


What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to work at optimum performance no matter what is going on around us. It is the capacity we have to face difficult situations and to manage change in a positive manner. Resilience is sometimes characterised as being 'in the flow' emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually.

A good example of resilience is the Olympics when many athletes compete at their personal best and perform amazingly in the face of great pressure and competition. In order to understand what this might feel like, it is useful to consider what you felt like the last time you were operating at your best.

You may recall feelings such as being calm, confident, energised, challenging, focused, engaged, powerful or happy. We know that the more we feel these positive states, the more able we are to deal with difficult situations, challenges and our own and others' emotions. This is an essential leadership quality; by role modelling resilience we can promote a healthy and positive work environment.



So the challenge is how can you spend more time in the 'Regeneration' Zone in order for you to build resilience and operate at your personal best?

The challenge of constant change

With constant change comes ambiguity and some of us deal better with this than others. We are being asked more and more to do things faster, to think quicker, and to perform at pace.

With mobile technology, fixed working hours seem to be a thing of the past for many of us. This can create pressure on our resources so our physical, mental, spiritual and emotional energy can become drained. On top of all that we may also have teams of people to manage who are going through the same drains on their own resources. We have to act as role models for them and continue to engage them. This is not even taking into consideration the needs and demands that are placed on us in our personal lives too. Life events such as financial worries, relationship problems, moving home and looking after children or the elderly put additional strains on our time and ability to cope.

For many of us, just reflecting on this state of reality is enough to get us to question how well we cope with all of the demands that are put upon us both at work and at home.

Managing emotional state

The key to having high resilience is managing our emotional state because fundamentally, how we are feeling dictates our physical, mental and spiritual state.

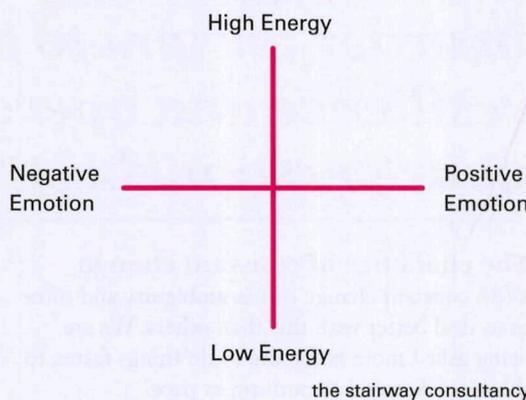
If we are feeling sad or angry, it will affect our ability to think straight or have a logical approach to problem solving. If we are sad or angry we will find it difficult to find the physical energy we need to resolve things. Also, if we are feeling sad or angry, it restricts our ability to feel fulfilled and satisfied with our lot.

When we are able to feel positive emotion and display high energy we are in a place that allows us to work at our personal best. When we feel positive emotion a 'feel good' hormone is released and this allows our minds to think at their best,



our bodies to function physically at their best and for us to feel an overall sense of fulfilment. This is when we are at our most resilient and the more we stay in this space, the more resilient we become.

Figure 1: Our feelings

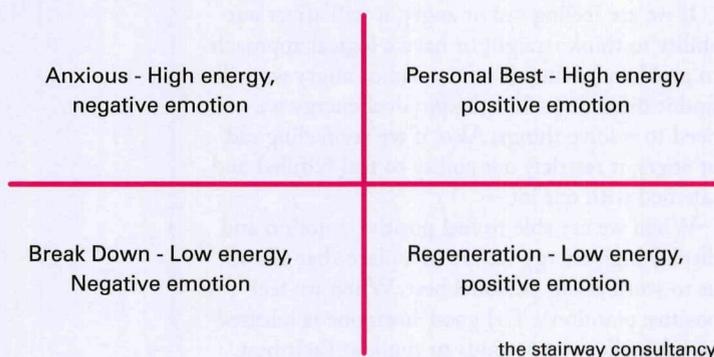


The other options are less attractive. If we are occupying the high energy and negative emotion quadrant, it means we are struggling to cope with what is happening to us. Our negative emotions can make us feel overcome, frustrated, worried, concerned and stressed. When we are feeling negative, cortisol is released into our bodies which restricts our ability to think straight and can create health issues if this state becomes the norm for us.

If we have moved to a place of negative emotion and low energy we are likely to be feeling more helpless, and finding it increasingly difficult to bring ourselves out of that place – we are in fact, in burn out.

The fourth and final quadrant is a state of recharge – we need to go to this positive emotion and low energy to recoup and chill so that the batteries are in fact recharged. Without visiting this place it is unlikely we are going to be able to operate in the personal best zone as much as we would like to.

Figure 2: Energy and emotion zones



How resilient are you?

'Personal Best' therefore is where we are exhibiting high quantity of energy and positive emotion. 'Regeneration' is where you experience a low quantity of energy but high positive emotion. 'Anxious' mode is where you expand a high quantity of energy but experience negative emotional state and 'Break-down' is where you have a low quantity of energy and a negative emotional state.

Thinking about how we have described each of the quadrants, which quadrants do you populate most and why? This is something to reflect on going forward. Apart from the 'Personal Best' quadrant of high quantity of energy and positive quality of energy, we find a lot of people are spending time in the 'Anxious' Zone. This has long term negative implications for your health and wellbeing.

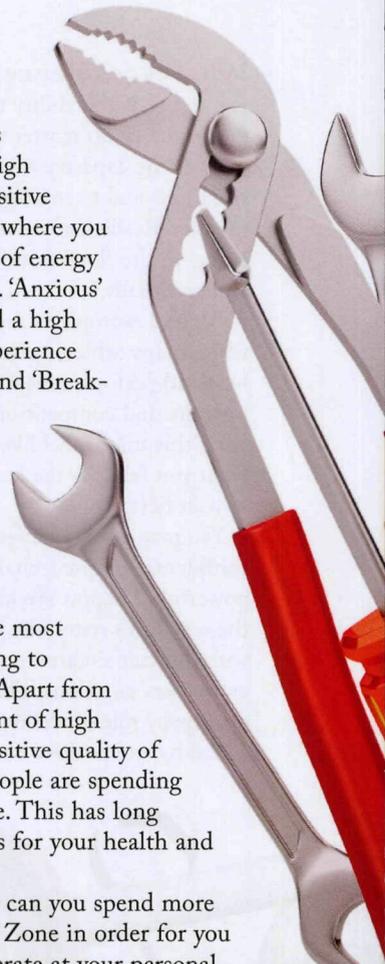
So the challenge is how can you spend more time in the 'Regeneration' Zone in order for you to build resilience and operate at your personal best?

If you do not spend time in the 'Regeneration' Zone you will default to the 'Anxious' Zone because you have not allowed yourself to recharge either physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually.

Once in the 'Anxious' Zone we can become trapped in a vicious circle – running at full speed but feeling we are not achieving anything and not enjoying what work or life brings.

In order to understand where you spend most of your time, the authors have developed an online Resilience Questionnaire. The questionnaire identifies areas of strength in terms of resilience and where and how you can develop resilience.

To find out what you need to do more of to ensure you stay in a state of positive emotion and high energy as often as you can, you can undertake a number of activities designed for each of the four emotional, physical, mental and spiritual states. The questionnaire will indicate which of the four areas you need to invest most in. We often use this as a diagnostic tool to raise leaders' awareness around resilience in one-to-one coaching sessions.





Four strategic themes to increasing resilience

Once people are aware of their energy and emotional levels, discussing tools and techniques with leaders and managers to increase their resilience is an important step forward. It is up to each individual to decide what is going to work for them. However, we have identified a series of strategies that individuals can adopt to increase their resilience. These address the four areas of resilience: feeling, doing, thinking and being. For each area we have created an inventory of possible enhancement actions. For example:



**Feeling =
Emotion and
relationships**
"joy, sorrow,
fear, hate"

Life events such as financial worries, relationship problems, moving home and looking after children or the elderly put additional strains on our time and ability to cope

A potential strategy for increasing emotional resilience is to find out how others value you and where you can receive positive recognition. Creating and sustaining meaningful supportive relationships is helpful in providing an emotional crutch. Expressing your feelings to others and being appreciated is a powerful means of creating an emotional 'piggy bank'.



**Doing =
Physical activity**
"action,
performance,
execution"

To increase physical wellbeing, examine your levels of exercise and what physical activity realistically you can do that you would enjoy and that you are able to build into your lifestyle. There is a lot of recent research around the power of aerobic exercise in helping to increase physical wellbeing but also increasing mental and learning capacity.

**Thinking =
Mental state**
"rational,
reasoning,
reflective"

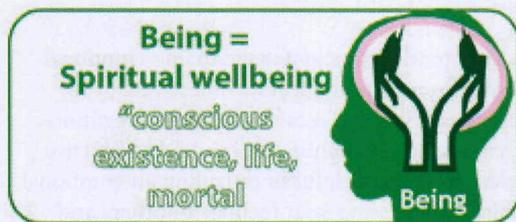


It is human nature to worry about change and the future but worry is an unproductive human activity. One way to increase mental resilience is



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to write down any concerns or worries and which of those you can control and address. Part of mental resilience is recognising those concerns you are able to influence and leaving those that you cannot.



Spiritual wellbeing centres on having meaning in your life and ensuring that your actions align with your values. One strategy to increase spiritual wellbeing is to explore what you are doing that fulfils the 'whole you' and what you can do more to make a difference in your life and to undertake activities that are important to you.

Case study

Using the resilience model we have successfully helped leaders in a wide number of organisations to develop their capacity to manage change effectively. We coached a senior manager and his team, for example, in a business that had gone through a series of changes involving a merger and acquisition and numerous restructures.

Both the management team and their team members were feeling the strain and this manifested itself in lower levels of productivity, absenteeism and long term health issues.

Working with the team firstly on an individual basis, each manager identified their strengths and levels of resilience. We provided coaching to each team member to help them develop practical action plans for developing their resilience. These often amounted to small steps such as taking regular breaks (working in

90-minute blocks and then moving away from one's desk and taking a break), walking to work every other day, holding coffee and chat drop-ins for team members etc, but they had a huge overall impact on personal performance levels.

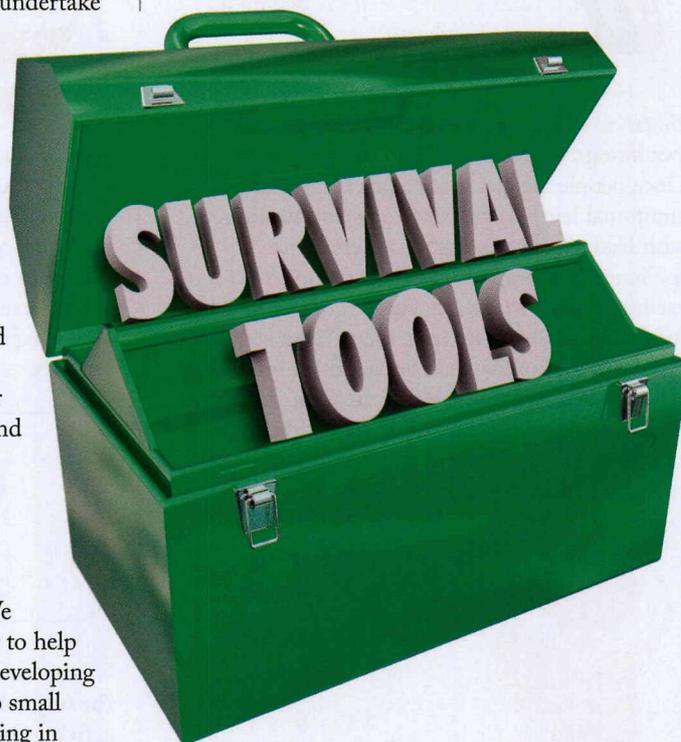
Another important step for the team as a whole was holding a facilitated session around resilience at work and its importance as a leadership quality. This workshop provided a safe place for managers to discuss the emotions and levels of energy they were experiencing. They went on to agree an improvement plan to recognise some of the emotional, physical, spiritual and mental strategies they could adopt as a team to improve their overall performance. The whole team's commitment to action meant that within a year their employee engagement scores rose by 10 points.

Conclusion

Being resilient is an essential quality in today's workplace. In the face of difficult situations and constant change, leaders need to adopt strategies to remain positive and to ensure that they have high energy and drive to see things through.

People with high levels of resilience are those who have high levels of emotional, physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. By identifying your strengths and areas of stretch in these four areas, individuals can adopt strategies to increase their ability to cope in times of difficulty and change.

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