The Resilience Factor

The following information is a condensed summary of Reivich & Shatte’s book *The Resilience Factor: Seven Essential Skills for Overcoming Life’s Inevitable Obstacles* (2003). This summary was created by Rick Olson.

**Introduction**

Resilience is a crucial ingredient – perhaps the crucial ingredient – to a happy, healthy life. More than anything else, it's what determines how high we rise above what threatens to wear us down, from battling an illness, to bolstering a marriage, to carrying on after a national crisis. Everyone needs resilience.

A resilient view is characterised by **accurate and flexible thinking**, and consists of:

- Creative problem solving
- The capacity to see other points of view
- Challenging one’s own views
- and the ability to move on with daily life despite obstacles.

Most importantly, resilience is not just an ability that we’re born with and need to survive, but a skill that anyone can learn and improve in order to thrive.

*The Resilience Factor* builds on Seligman’s *Learned Optimism* by describing proven techniques for enhancing our capacity to weather even the cruelest setbacks, such that readers of the book will flourish, thanks to their enhanced ability to overcome obstacles of any kind. *The Resilience Factor* will teach readers to:

- Cast off harsh self-criticisms and negative self-images
- Navigate through the fallout of any kind of crisis
- Cope with grief and anxiety
- Overcome obstacles in relationships, parenting, or on the job
- Achieve greater physical health
- Bolster optimism, take chances, and embrace life In light of the unprecedented challenges we've recently faced, there's never been a greater need to boost our resilience

Four research driven pillars that provide the foundation for the skills of resilience:

1. Life **change is possible.**
2. Thinking is the key in boosting resiliency. The way we think about daily stress and challenges directly affects our resilience. We can become more resilient by changing how we think about challenges and adversity.
3. Accurate thinking is the key. A resilient perspective is based on accurate and flexible thinking.
4. Refocus on the human strengths.

What is Resilience?

Resilience is generally defined as the ability to “cope well with adversity” and “persevere and adapt when things go awry.” Resilience is the ability to:

- Overcome the obstacles of childhood
- Steer through the everyday adversities that befall us
- Bounce back from setbacks that occur
- Reach out to achieve all you are capable of.

Research tells us that resilient people are
- Healthier and live longer
- More successful in school and jobs
- Happier in relationships
- Less prone to depression

Resilience helps people
- Deal with stress and adversity
- Overcome childhood disadvantage
- Reach out to new opportunities

Our responses to stress involve biological, environmental and psychological factors. There is wide variability in the pattern and intensity of people’s physiological responses to stress. Because of individual biological differences in the functioning of the autonomic, endocrine and immune systems, some people are very vulnerable to stress and others much less so. Similarly, people’s environments differ in the number and nature of stressful events they encounter, the availability of supportive friends and relatives and the cultural norms that teach us how to respond to adverse events.

Although exercise and relaxation techniques can strengthen our biological response to stress and community action can help make the places we live less stressful and more supportive, the strongest influences on our response to stress are psychological factors, namely, the way we think.

Central to resilience are our beliefs.

What beliefs are involved in resilient thinking?

Our beliefs about:
• The future (optimism versus pessimism)
• Ourselves (self-efficacy versus helplessness) and
• Our perceptions of control, commitment and challenge (hardiness)
  all relate to the resilience with which we adapt to stress and adversity.

How is optimism related to resilience?
Our beliefs about the way things will turn out have a significant influence on the ways in which we respond to stress and adversity. Optimistic people expect that in the end things will turn out well, despite the difficulties they may face in the present. Pessimists, on the other hand, tend to view the future as uncertain at best and, at worst, filled with continued difficulties and insurmountable struggles. Optimists view themselves as less helpless in the face of stress than pessimists do, they adjust better to negative events and they have a lower risk of anxiety and depression. Optimism also appears to affect our physical well-being. A study of women being treated for breast cancer revealed that optimists lived longer during the five years of the study, even when the physical severity of the disease was the same at the outset of the study.

How is self-efficacy related to resilience?
Our views about the future are very much related to our views about ourselves and our ability to cope with the demands of a stressful situation. The conviction that we have the resources to deal with an adverse event predicts a better adjustment than the belief that we are incapable (Bandura, 1997). These beliefs about our ability to cope with stress and solve our problems are referred to as self-efficacy and are always specific to the particular situation. We develop these beliefs through successful experiences in similar situations, by watching others cope successfully, and by being encouraged by others who believe we can be successful.

Note: Self-efficacy is a result of mastery - Martin Seligman and his colleagues have argued that self-esteem has two components: “doing well” and “feeling good.” Doing well creates confidence in our ability to think and cope with the basic challenges of life. Feeling good requires us to feel worthy and to be confident of our right to be happy. Seligman argues that there is no way of teaching people to feel good without their first doing well. In other words, feeling good is a side effect of mastering challenges, overcoming frustrations and solving problems – that is, of doing well.

How is hardiness related to resilience?
Optimism and self-efficacy are obviously linked to the three C’s of hardiness, which resilient people have in common and that serve to protect them from stress:

• **Control**: a belief in their ability to take charge of the controllable aspects of a situation and “influence a more positive outcome”
• **Challenge**: a view of mistakes as opportunities for new learning, and change as potential for growth
• **Commitment**: an active engagement in work and other pursuits that provides a basis of meaning for their lives
Resilient, or “hardy,” individuals believe that they can influence the outcomes of events (control), they believe that what they do is important (commitment), and they assess stressful events as challenges to master (challenge) rather than as threats to their well-being. The most powerful belief in buffering the negative effects of stress is the belief that we are in control. Clearly our beliefs about our ability to cope (self-efficacy) and our view of the future (optimism or pessimism) are involved in our assessments of how much we can influence a given situation.

Research into hardiness, self-efficacy and optimism all suggest that certain beliefs help us to cope better and to live longer, healthier and happier lives. The beliefs behind our explanations of the events in our lives often need more careful scrutiny if we are to make our thinking more accurate and flexible.

Studies of hardiness, self-efficacy and optimism have all found that our responses to stress are to a large extent determined by our thoughts and beliefs. The way we think about stress and adversity, our beliefs about our abilities and our attitudes toward the future have powerful effects on how we cope. People who function well in the face of psychological and physical stress share these three beliefs that distinguish them from people who do not.

**Seven Critical Factors That Comprise Resilience**

Resilience as a concept is somewhat difficult to define and measure. Seven critical factors, or inner strengths, that comprise resilience have been isolated:

1. **Emotion Regulation** – The ability to stay calm under pressure. Resilient people can control their emotions, especially in the face of a challenge or adversity, in order to stay goal focused. This factor is important for succeeding at work, forming intimate relationships and maintaining physical health. (Skills to increase include: 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7, described below)

2. **Impulse Control** – The ability to rein in your behavior under pressure. (Closely links to Emotional Regulation) (Skills to increase include: 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7)

3. **Causal Analysis** – The ability to comprehensively – and accurately – identify the causes of problems, which helps you to avoid the same mistakes over and over. Causal Analysis is driven by your Explanatory Style – the way you explain to yourself why a problem has occurred. Your Explanatory Style can help or hinder your problem solving ability. Good problem solving is the cornerstone of resilience, and you can learn to flex around your style to become more resilient. (Skills to increase include: 1, 2, 4 and 7)

4. **Self-Efficacy** – Our sense of competence and mastery in the world. This resiliency factor represents our belief that we can solve problems we may experience and our faith in our ability to succeed. (Skills to increase include: 1, 4,5 and 7)

5. **Realistic Optimism** – A belief that things can change for the better, that there is hope for the future and that you can control the direction of your life. In the truly resilient person, these beliefs are tempered by a healthy sense of reality – unlike unbridled or unrealistic optimism, which may lead to
poor risk assessment and bad decisions. (Skills to increase include: 1, 4 and 7)

6. **Empathy** – How well you are able to read other people’s cues to their psychological and emotional states. If you score high on Empathy, you have excellent people skills, which make you a more effective leader, team member, friend, spouse and parent. (Skills to increase include: 1, 3 and 7)

7. **Reaching Out** – The ability to seek out new opportunities challenges and relationships – to “push the envelope” in all areas of your life for greater satisfaction, success and resilience. (Skills to increase include: 1, 3, 5 and 7)

**The Seven Skills of Resilience - What can I do to be more resilient?**

There are many things we can do to increase our resilience. In addition to taking good care of ourselves physically by getting enough sleep, eating nutritious food and exercising regularly, we can learn how to increase the accuracy and flexibility of our thinking. The Resilience Factor describes the seven skills below, which will give you opportunities to:

- Increase your awareness of the relationship between your thoughts and your emotions.
- Gain insight into your beliefs when things go wrong.
- Look for alternative beliefs when you are experiencing debilitating emotions.

**Know Thyself Skills:**

1. **ABC (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences)** You are what you think. It is not the events that happen to us that cause our feelings and behaviors – it is our thoughts or beliefs about the events that drive how we feel and what we do. There are “why” beliefs and “what next” beliefs.

   We know from our everyday experiences that what we think and how we feel are very much related. When you are feeling happy and a friend doesn’t return a phone call, you just think she’s too busy or has forgotten. Because of the way you interpret her behavior, you simply give her another call. But when you are anxious and depressed, you may see her failure to return that call as a comment about your worth to her. Your interpretation of her behavior makes you feel increasingly bad about yourself and your friendship, and so it is much less likely that you will give her another call.

   Cognition and emotion are intricately bound together. The centers in the brain responsible for each are in constant communication with each other. That our emotions and moods affect our thinking is readily apparent in our everyday experience. Although it is less obvious how our thoughts affect our emotions and moods, we do know that cognition and emotion have a reciprocal relationship; that is, the influence runs both ways.

   For the most part we respond to the events in our lives in reasonable and productive ways that allow us to carry on with our lives. We usually deal with our emotions in ways that enhance our health and well-being, but there are times when we experience debilitating emotions that don’t help us to solve our problems and don’t motivate us to engage in constructive actions. Many of us brood continuously about the significance of adverse events and we feel the corresponding
emotions over and over again, but to no advantage.

We lie awake at night thinking about the events and we become irritable. Rather than being helpful, our emotions have become debilitative. They add to our distress from the original event and prevent us from carrying on with our lives, solving problems and bouncing back. Each of us is particularly sensitive to certain kinds of adversity or events, which are more likely than others to illicit these debilitating emotions. These long-lasting, usually intense emotions spring from our way of thinking. If we were to describe these beliefs to other people (or even to ourselves), they would probably appear highly inaccurate and illogical.

Reivich and Shatté argue that the first step in becoming more resilient is to gain self-awareness, specifically, to listen to our interpretations of adverse events. What do we say to ourselves when we are upset? What is our interior monologue when things go wrong? It is particularly important to ask ourselves those questions when we are under stress and not coping well, that is, when we are feeling debilitating, nonproductive emotions such as the ones described above. These emotions are intense and long-lasting, and they don’t help us to solve the problem or take constructive action for the future. Reivich and Shatté suggest that each of us has our own unique reactions to particular situations that “push our buttons.” We can use the ABC model to gain insight into the thoughts we have and we can evaluate whether or not they are accurate. The first step, however, is just to become aware of our interior monologue. In other words, we need to understand what thoughts, explanations, and interpretations we have when things go wrong.

Reivich and Shatté provided the table attached as Appendix 1, entitled “Which Adversities Push Your Buttons” to help you identify adversities that may be worth investigating. They also suggest we observe our thoughts during adverse events, particularly those that seem to distress us much more than seems reasonable. They describe a “beeper” exercise that involves setting a timer or programmable watch to beep throughout the day and then recording our thoughts each time the beeper sounds. A less intrusive method would be to keep a diary or journal that includes your thoughts and beliefs during times of stress and adversity. It is important to use whatever method helps you to become more aware of the beliefs you have that connect the adverse events in your life with your emotional reactions and your behavior.

For many people, it is easy to identify the adverse event (A) and their feelings and behavior (C). But is much more difficult to figure out what beliefs (the B part) led them to feel and react that way. Reivich and Shatté describe a series of beliefs that are connected to specific feelings and kinds of behavior. The chart below outlines the links between specific beliefs and emotions that are predictable and universal. The authors have charted only the “negative” emotions, since they are commonly the ones we experience in times of adversity.

**Belief – Consequences Couplets** that Reivich and Shatte say always go together:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief:</th>
<th>Consequence/Emotion</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violation of your rights</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real world loss or loss of self-worth</td>
<td>Sadness, depression</td>
<td>Why</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Violation of another's rights  Guilt  Why
Negative comparison to others  Embarrassment  Why
Future threat  Anxiety, fear  What next

These couplets can be used to:

- Disentangle the mixture of emotions you experience when faced the a button-push adversity and
- Identify the beliefs that are causing you to get “stuck” in a particular emotion, gain understanding of why you reacted as you did, and learn to keep your bearings in even the most stressful circumstances.

Thus the ABC model consists of identifying the adversities that push your button (using a checklist and/or keeping an “emotion log”), then using the Adversity and the Consequence/Emotion to figure out the “Ticker Tape Beliefs” that caused the consequence. With a series of such events, might begin to identify a pattern. The beliefs identified in this step should be cross-checked with the Couplets table and if the Ticker Tape Belief does not match the emotion felt, then further peeling of the onion is needed to get to underlying beliefs.

Recognising your beliefs will help you to understand better why certain adverse events cause you to feel strong, long-lasting and debilitating emotions. Your beliefs will give you insight into what kinds of adversity “push your buttons”; and once you have identified these beliefs, you can examine them for accuracy. It is important to pay particular attention to beliefs that seem irrational or inaccurate. Is there another way to view the situation? Are there other beliefs that would more accurately explain what has happened and what you need to do about it?

Once you have identified your beliefs, you can begin to challenge them. It is helpful to think about plausible, alternative beliefs. For example, imagine you find out that several friends have organised a party but have not invited you. You find yourself feeling quite angry and you have been thinking about how rude and inconsiderate it was for them to leave you out. You find yourself avoiding these friends and being aloof when you are with them. The ABC’s of this adverse event might look like this:

A = Not being invited to the party.
B = These friends have treated me badly; they have excluded me. “How rude to leave me out. I thought I these people were my friends, but they are mean.”
C = Feeling angry and acting in a hostile and aloof manner with these friends.

Imagine that after examining your beliefs in this situation, you realise that they may not be entirely accurate, or at least you suspect that there might be other beliefs that would explain your friends’ behavior. After all, they are still friendly and they’re happy to see you. They are not acting as though they dislike you and they have done nothing else that you would interpret as mean. Perhaps they forgot to invite you or thought you had to work that evening. You can probably generate many other
possible explanations for their behavior that would lead you to have very different feelings and engage in significantly different behavior. Here is an example:

A = Not being invited to the party.
B = “These people usually include me in their plans. They are friendly and otherwise seem to enjoy my company. There must be some reason I am not invited. I wonder what it is.”
C = Feeling puzzled and confused and asking them about their plans and whether I could join them.

Since it can be difficult to search for plausible, alternative beliefs, there are times when talking to someone else is helpful. Another helpful method for generating alternative beliefs is to put yourself in the other person’s position. In this case it would be to view not being invited to the party from your friends’ perspective.

Increasing our self-awareness by articulating our beliefs and observing their connection to our emotions and behavior is a vital first step in increasing the accuracy and flexibility our thinking. Doing our ABC’s is the first step in increasing our resilience.

Some of the difficulties and the benefits of using the ABC model and developing alternative beliefs are as follows:

Some common difficulties identified include the following:

- They may not be able to separate their beliefs from their emotional reactions.
- It can be hard to take another perspective when they are angry.
- It is time-consuming to try to identify their beliefs.
- It is hard to give up one’s beliefs and entertain the possibility that there is another way to view the situation.

Some common benefits include the following:

- It provides insight into one’s reactions.
- It helps promote problem solving.
- It helps to reduce distress by enabling the person to consider other possible beliefs.
- It helps to preserve relationships by developing empathy.

2. **Avoiding Thinking Traps** (Check for 8 thinking errors)
   a. Jumping to conclusions
   b. Tunnel vision
   c. Magnifying and minimising
   d. Personalising
   e. Externalising
   f. Overgeneralising
   g. Mind reading
   h. Emotional reasoning
Many of these are “leaps of abstraction” up the “ladder of inference” (that Peter Senge talked about in “The Fifth Discipline”) which often lead to erroneous conclusions based on incorrect beliefs or assumptions upon which the conclusions were based. To be resilient does not mean you cannot personalise or generalise, but that the beliefs be based on reality. This implies that your assumptions and beliefs (and general “rules” about how the world works based on inductive reasoning) need to be checked against other people’s realities (or through reflection and inquiry) to get a better sense of what is real.

3. Detecting Iceberg Beliefs
Look for underlying beliefs about how the world ought to operate and how you feel you ought to operate within that world.

Many people have iceberg beliefs that fall into one of three general categories or themes:

- Achievement (or its companion, perfection)
- Acceptance and
- Control.

Ask, “What is this belief costing me? How is it helping me? Is it the best choice in this situation to maximise the benefit/cost ratio?”

Assimilation bias and confirmation bias make the underlying beliefs hard to exorcise.

Steps to detect iceberg beliefs:

a. Check whether your Cs are out of proportion to your Bs.
b. Check whether the quality of your C is mismatched with the category of your Bs.
c. Check whether you are struggling to make a seemingly simple decision.

Helpful questions include:

- What does that mean to me?
- What is the most upsetting part of that to me?
- What is the worst part of that to me?
- What does that say to me?
- What is so bad about that?

Change Skills:

4. Challenging Beliefs

- ABC an adversity
- Pie chart the causes
- Identify your explanatory style (Me, Always, Everything (i.e. personal, permanent, pervasive)?
- Being flexible – are there other possible alternative causes?
- Being accurate – what evidence is there for and against believed causes?
- New pie chart
- Create solution based on the most likely.

5. **Putting it in Perspective**

The skill of “decatastrophising” or “putting it in perspective” enables you to examine your beliefs about the future and to generate alternative beliefs in much the same way that the ABC model showed you how to recognise and challenge your beliefs about the causes of negative events and their emotional connections.

Revich & Shatté suggest first describing the best possible outcome of the negative event, the worst possible outcome and the most likely outcome. Next they propose judging the likelihood that each will happen. This is followed up with generating possible solutions to deal with the most likely outcome. In order to do this kind of thinking, Seligman and his colleagues formulated six questions we can ask ourselves:

- a. What is the worst thing that can happen?
- b. What is one thing I can do to help stop the worst thing from happening?
- c. What is the best thing that can happen?
- d. What is one thing I can do to make the best thing happen?
- e. What is the most likely thing that will happen?
- f. What can I do to handle the most likely thing if it happens?

By asking ourselves these questions we can increase the accuracy of our beliefs about the future and help ourselves to regulate our emotions, particularly anxiety and despair. Gaining awareness of our patterns of thinking and making an effort to challenge our beliefs about the causes and future threats of negative events in our lives are proven ways to begin to increase our resilience.

The last step in this activity is to use problem-solving strategies to generate a course of action for dealing with the most likely outcome of a difficult situation. Seligman and his colleagues suggest the following technique:

- b. Take the other person’s point of view.
- c. Choose a goal and make a list of possible paths for reaching it.
- d. Identify the pluses and minuses of each path.
- e. Evaluate the solution – if it didn’t work try another.
6. **Calming and Focusing**
   - Stop Thoughts with controlled breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation
   - Set Time/Write – Scarlett: “I’ll think about this tomorrow.”
   - Mental Games – Alphabet game, categories, song lyrics, etc.
   - Use positive imagery, e.g., quiet place or successfully meeting the challenge ahead

7. **Real Time Resiliency**
   - Alternatives: A more accurate what of seeing this is...
   - Evidence: That’s not true because....
   - Implications: A more likely outcome is ... and I can ... to deal with it. (Putting it into action)
Appendix 1: Which Adversities Push Your Buttons?

Rate the following situations and emotions on a scale of 1 – 5 regarding your difficulty in dealing with them. For any situation or emotion rated a 4 or a 5, try to remember a specific example of a time when you felt unhappy with your attempt to respond to the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situations and Emotions</th>
<th>Score (1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts at work with colleagues</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts at work with authority</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts with family members</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts with friends</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving positive feedback</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving negative feedback</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time alone</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having enough time for yourself</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking on new responsibilities at work</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing a hectic schedule</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggling many tasks at once</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting to change</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending social functions</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing your personal and professional life</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to negative emotions in others</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to positive emotions in others</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with your own:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savoring happiness or contentment</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each situation that you scored as a 4 or a 5 is an adversity for you. Are there any patterns? Do you have more adversities in one domain of your life: personal or professional? Are there any themes that are particularly troublesome to you? Do you feel stuck in any certain emotions?)}