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# Resilience and finding your way through difficult times

*Resilience is an ongoing process of adapting to difficulty, shaped by our feelings, our choices and the support around us.*

11 min read



Resilience is the process of adapting to difficult experiences, such as loss, stress or unexpected change. It can involve finding new ways to cope, asking for help and gradually adjusting to changed circumstances. Being resilient does not mean feeling strong all the time: we can struggle and still find a way forward. Our ability to adapt depends both on our own responses and on the relationships, resources and living conditions that support us.

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## What resilience looks like in everyday life

We often hear about resilience when someone has overcome a major crisis. Yet the need to adapt also appears in less visible situations: a difficult period at work, an uncertain future, moving to a new country or caring for someone while trying to manage our own responsibilities.

In these situations, resilience can look quite ordinary. It might involve discussing a deadline, accepting practical help, finding a more manageable routine or deciding that an old plan needs to change. Sometimes the first step is simply recognising that we cannot keep doing everything in the same way.

The American Psychological Association describes resilience as adaptation to adversity and significant stress. It emphasises that resilience can be developed and that people may still experience emotional distress while adapting. [1] This helps us understand why struggling and coping can happen at the same time.

Someone may feel deeply disappointed after a rejection and still begin looking at other options. A person living through grief may continue to grieve while gradually returning to activities that matter to them. Neither needs to feel completely better before taking a step forward.

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## **Why resilience changes with our circumstances**

Our ability to cope is not the same in every situation. We may feel confident handling a professional setback but much more vulnerable during family conflict. We may manage a demanding week when we have company and practical support, then find similar demands overwhelming when we are alone.

For this reason, resilience is better understood as an ongoing process than as a permanent personal quality. It involves a changing relationship between the difficulty we face, what we can do and the help available to us.

Imagine two people starting a new job. One has clear instructions, a supportive colleague and a manageable journey to work. The other receives little guidance, worries about transport costs and has no one to ask for help. Their experiences cannot be explained only by differences in confidence or motivation.

Recognising these differences makes it easier to respond with care. Instead of judging ourselves or others for finding something difficult, we can look more closely at what is missing and what might make the situation manageable.

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## **Allowing difficult feelings without being ruled by them**

When something painful happens, advice to stay positive may arrive before we have had time to understand our own reaction. We may feel pressure to be grateful, find a lesson or reassure other people that we are fine.

A more helpful starting point is to acknowledge what we feel. Sadness may reflect a loss. Anger may arise when something feels unfair. Fear may accompany uncertainty. We do not have to decide immediately whether an emotion is useful or reasonable in order to recognise that it is present.

Acknowledging a feeling also leaves room to choose how we respond. We can be angry and postpone a conversation until we are ready to speak clearly. We can feel anxious and ask for information. We can feel disappointed and give ourselves time before making an important decision.

There is room for mixed feelings too. A new opportunity can be exciting and frightening. A day with moments of enjoyment can still contain grief. Resilience does not require us to simplify these experiences or recover according to someone else's timetable.

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## Changing our approach when persistence is no longer enough

Persistence matters when we are working towards something meaningful. However, continuing with the same approach is not always the most helpful response. A plan can become unrealistic, a role can demand more than we can give, or a situation can become harmful.

Consider a community event that has become too ambitious for the people organising it. The team might reduce the programme, change the date or invite another organisation to help. These adjustments allow the original purpose to remain while making the work more manageable.

Similar decisions appear in our personal lives. We may need to revise a goal, take longer than expected or seek a different form of support. Sometimes we need to leave a situation rather than become better at tolerating it.

Understanding what is happening does not mean approving of it. We can acknowledge our current circumstances while also asking for change. Where our own choices are limited, collective action or help from an appropriate service may be needed.

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## The importance of relationships and accessible support

The Resilience Research Centre emphasises that resilience depends on access to psychological, social, cultural and physical resources. Its approach looks at how people find support and how families, communities and institutions make meaningful support available. [2]

This gives us a broader picture than individual coping skills alone. A trusted friend can matter, but so can a safe home, understandable information, affordable transport or a welcoming place to meet others. Encouraging someone to ask for help needs to go alongside making that help accessible.

Support also takes different forms. One person may need someone to listen; another may need assistance making an appointment or understanding a letter. Sometimes sharing a meal or having company during an ordinary activity feels more useful than receiving advice.

People find belonging in different places, including friendships, family networks, cultural communities and shared interests. There is no single arrangement that works for everyone. What matters is whether the support feels safe, relevant and available to the person who needs it.

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## Rest, boundaries and self-compassion

When everyday demands become excessive, the answer may involve reducing them. Repeated interruptions, constant availability and responsibilities that are never clearly shared can leave little room to recover.

Rest deserves a place in our lives. Boundaries can help by making our availability and limits clearer. We might discuss when we can reply to messages, which tasks we can take on or how a responsibility could be shared more fairly.

These conversations are not equally easy for everyone. A person with little control over working hours or income may need practical or organisational support. Advice about boundaries should recognise these limits rather than assume that everyone is free to make the same choices.

We can also notice how we speak to ourselves. Saying *“I should manage all of this”* may add blame to an already difficult situation. Saying *“This is too much for me to manage alone”* makes it easier to consider what needs to change.

Self-compassion is one way to explore a more supportive response to our own difficulties. Kristin Neff’s recorded resources include approaches focused on comfort, motivation and protection, including speaking up and setting boundaries. [3] Readers can choose what feels relevant without turning self-care into another obligation.

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## Finding continuity and meaning

When life changes, familiar activities may offer a sense of continuity. Preparing a meal, caring for an animal, visiting a favourite place or keeping a regular conversation can give a day some shape. The value of these activities lies in what they mean to the person doing them.

Creative expression can offer another way to explore an experience. Writing, photography, music or drawing may allow us to give form to something we cannot easily explain. A private piece of writing or an image chosen for its personal meaning can be enough; there is no need to produce something polished or share it with others.

Some people eventually discover new priorities after adversity. Others need safety, relief and time before thinking about what comes next. Personal growth can happen, but it should not become a requirement or a measure of whether someone has recovered well.

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## Creating conditions for resilience in youth work

For youth workers and educators, supporting resilience involves considering the spaces we create. Can participants make mistakes without humiliation? Can they choose how much to share? Do they know where to turn if they need support?

A discussion about resilience can use everyday examples or fictional situations. Participants should be able to listen, pass or contribute without explaining painful personal experiences. This allows learning while respecting privacy and different understandings of wellbeing.

Organisations can apply the same thinking to their teams. Encouraging resilience should accompany attention to workload, communication and practical support. People need conditions that allow them to use what they learn.

#### ◆ A QUESTION TO KEEP IN MIND

**What would make this situation a little more manageable, and who could help make that possible?**

This question offers a simple starting point for recognising a need. An answer might involve a conversation, practical assistance, more time or a change in expectations.

Resilience can include vulnerability, receiving care and changing direction. We do not have to deal with difficulty entirely on our own. If distress persists or interferes with everyday life, a qualified mental-health professional can help identify appropriate support. The resources below can support learning and reflection without replacing individual care.

## A TED Talk worth exploring

### Lucy Hone and 3 secrets of resilient people

In this TEDxChristchurch talk, researcher Lucy Hone connects her work on resilience with her personal experience of grief. Her three approaches concern recognising adversity as part of life, directing attention towards what can be influenced and considering whether a response is helping. [4]

The talk offers a perspective to think with, rather than a formula everyone must follow. Readers may recognise useful ideas while also noticing where their needs or circumstances differ.

#### LUCY HONE AND 3 SECRETS OF RESILIENT PEOPLE

##### Watch the TED Talk or read the transcript

Content note: the talk discusses the death of a child and grief. Choose whether to watch now, read the transcript or leave it for another time.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy\\_hone\\_3\\_secrets\\_of\\_resilient\\_people](https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy_hone_3_secrets_of_resilient_people)

## Useful resources to read, listen to and download

#### FURTHER RESOURCES

### **WHO – Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: download the guide and find language versions and audio**

This free illustrated guide introduces practical ways to cope with stress, including grounding, making room for feelings and acting on values. It is available in multiple languages, including Italian, with accompanying audio resources. It is useful for readers who prefer a visual guide or want to explore a short practice at their own pace. [5]

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927>

### **APA – Building your resilience: read the APA resource**

A readable overview of connection, wellbeing, thinking patterns and purpose, with guidance on seeking professional help. This is a useful starting point for readers who want a short introduction from a professional psychology organisation. [1]

<https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience>

### **Kristin Neff – Self-Compassion Practices: explore the recorded practices**

Free recorded practices offer different ways to relate to yourself during a struggle. The page includes a general self-compassion break and approaches focused on comfort or protection. Choose a recording that suits your needs and stop if it feels unhelpful. [3]

<https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-practices/>

### **Resilience Research Centre – What Works: download the manual**

For facilitators, youth workers and organisations, this manual broadens the discussion from individual coping to programme design. It includes principles, case examples and guidance for supporting resilience in community settings. A digital PDF copy is available free of charge. [6]

<https://resilienceresearch.org/whatworks/>

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## **Sources**

- 1 American Psychological Association. *Building your resilience*. [APA resource](#).
- 2 Resilience Research Centre. *About Resilience*. [Social and ecological perspective](#).
- 3 Kristin Neff. *Self-Compassion Practices*. [Recorded resources](#).
- 4 Lucy Hone. *3 secrets of resilient people*. TEDxChristchurch, 2019. [Talk and transcript](#).
- 5 World Health Organization. *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress*, 2020. [Guide and audio resources](#).
- 6 Resilience Research Centre. *What Works*. [Programme design manual](#).



This content is educational and does not replace professional psychological support. If you or a young person you work with is in distress, please contact a qualified professional or local emergency services.



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