

Ways to Be Resilient During the Pandemic

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If you've been feeling more anxious or depressed than usual while sheltering at home, you aren't alone: Nationwide, Americans were prescribed 21 percent more antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and sleep aids in mid-March, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, than they were in mid-February, before the virus was widespread in the U.S., according to a report from pharmacy benefit manager Express Scripts. Protests over racial injustice have likely added to stress levels, according to a recent report on stress from the American Psychological Association (APA). The survey found that 83 percent of Americans say that the future of our nation is a significant source of stress.

You may be having trouble coping with the threat of a potentially deadly virus, the loneliness associated with self-isolation, the uncertainty of job insecurity and the stress of not knowing when it may be safe to resume your prepandemic life, especially because you haven't been able to access your support network in the usual ways. But tapping into your reserves of mental toughness and inner strength – known as resilience – may help you feel more positive and in control.

“When those external supports fall away, we're left with what we have inside,” says psychologist Rick Hanson, senior fellow of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. “As challenges go up, so must our resilience; that's what tests our resilience. And we're in a time of great challenge, so understandably, people's resilience is tested more than ever right now.”

Although resilience is a quality that you possess, you can work on becoming more resilient by adopting certain habits or practices.

“Resilience is something that can be learned,” says resilience expert Elizabeth Stanley, associate professor of security studies at Georgetown University. “We can train our minds and bodies to function better during stress, and it really all comes back to where we're directing our attention, consciously or unconsciously. Because even in challenging situations, we get to choose where we're directing our attention.”

Resilient people tend to be more optimistic and hopeful, less lonely and socially isolated, and they learn to cope better with adversity. Recent research has shown that being resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic may help lower your risk of depression and anxiety.

Try these ideas to work on becoming more resilient right now:

Control what you can

Because so many things are beyond your control right now, you may feel powerless and hopeless. Realizing that you can still make decisions that impact your life may help boost your resilience and help you feel more in control.

“The big one I think people can control is the structure and routines in their life,” says Michael Ungar, author of *Change Your World: The Science of Resilience and the True Path to Success*. “I get up at 7 in the morning, I have lunch at 12, I go to bed at 10 – that predictability says I got through today. [And] even if I begin to wallow in angst or depression, there’s still that sense of, ‘I got through yesterday. I’ll get through today.’”

Learn about methods for weathering adversity in these challenging times in Building Resilience.

Lifestyle habits within your control that may also help boost your resilience levels include eating healthily, going for walks, getting enough sleep, flipping off the news to avoid information overload and prioritizing things that make you happy.

“Do we put our attention on things that are upsetting, that we cannot change,” Hanson says, “or do we put our attention on the things that we can be productive about, like planting a garden or making a good meal or being compassionate or kind to another person? That’s very powerful.”

Reconfigure your outlook

Many people think of resilience as the ability to bounce back from adversity, the way that palm trees bend in the wind, then stand tall after a storm. But another aspect of resilience is reconfiguration: Allowing your beliefs or habits to permanently change because of the influence of extreme circumstances, which should allow you to weather future hardships. Your outlook may look slightly different than before – the way that Monterey cypress trees along the California coast appear permanently windswept – but you’ll be stronger and more resilient, just like the trees are.

“It’s more than just bouncing back; [it’s] about reconfiguration for all of us,” says Lisa Brown, director of the Risk and Resilience Research Lab at Palo Alto University. “Because we’re not running around so much, we have more time to reflect ... to think about how we want to live the rest of our lives moving forward.”

Find your inner strength

You’ve undoubtedly navigated through trying times before the pandemic, whether you dealt with a job layoff, cancer treatments or the death of someone special. Realizing that you’ve survived hardships should remind you that you possess coping strategies that may help in the current situation, even though the circumstances are different.

“There’s a lot of research on how people get through crises, and one of the universal findings is that the people who can calm and center are much more likely to get through it,” Hanson says. “Take some deep breaths. Tune into that feeling of being strong inside. You are a survivor. You can endure this. You’ve been through hard times before.”

Be more mindful

When you’re mindful, you pay attention to your thoughts and feelings without ignoring, judging or trying to change them. Doing this more often may help you feel more in control of your life.

“One of the reasons why mindfulness can help us be more resilient is because it keeps us much more in touch with our true reality in the moment,” Stanley says. “Whenever we can access our agency, that bolsters and protects us against the survival brain feeling powerless, helpless and lacking control. That’s how we can protect ourselves against trauma, even during challenging events.” —Lisa Fields