



20 Ways To

# BUILD RESILIENCE

by HEALTHMEANS

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# WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Everyone experiences ups and downs in life. When life is going well, we don't need to call upon resilience. However, when challenges come along, how well we adapt depends on our resilience.

## RESILIENCE HAS MANY DEFINITIONS. A COMMON DEFINITION IS:

*"Resilience can be thought of as a measure of the ability of an organism to adapt and to withstand challenges to its stability [1]."*

Resilience is a complex interaction of genetics, epigenetics, developmental environment, social factors, physical factors and neurobiology [2]. Some people are naturally more resilient than others because of genetics, their environment or both.

# ASPECTS OF BEING RESILIENT

There are three aspects of resilience. First is the ability to face and cope with challenges when they appear in our lives. Second is the ability to adapt to the changes often created by these challenges. Third is the ability to recover and even grow from these setbacks.

Resilience is often referred to as one's ability to "bounce back" from adversity, tragedy, trauma or significant stress. The tools in this guide are to help you build resilience to not only bounce back from life's challenges but also to empower you to grow and improve.

# ARE YOU RESILIENT?

Character traits associated with resilience include optimism, open-mindedness, good coping skills, having and maintaining a supportive social network, attending to one's physical well-being and embracing a personal moral compass [3]. Consider these traits and how strongly you identify with each, using the lens of a past or current challenging experience.

Regardless of how resilient you are now, it is possible to become more resilient by applying the suggestions in this guide.

# 20 WAYS TO BUILD RESILIENCE

## 1. WRITE A NEW STORY

When things aren't going well, it can be easy to ruminate over the negatives, but we can always choose to reframe the experience by choosing to contemplate the positive. When recalling a dark experience, try to write down some upsides of the situation. For example, you may see that experiencing physical pain has made you a more compassionate and empathetic person.

Participants in a 2014 study were instructed to write three positive things about a negative situation daily for three weeks. These participants were happier, more engaged and had a more positive outlook than the study participants who just wrote about their daily activities [4].



## 2. EXPRESS YOURSELF

Expressing your thoughts by free writing in a daily journal is a way to gain insights into life's challenges and your feelings about them. The goal is to write down thoughts as a stream of consciousness rather than a record of daily events. You might start with "What's on my mind right now is ..." as a journaling prompt. A 1988 study found that participants who wrote their thoughts in journals four days a week had improved immune function [5].

**IF FEELING STUCK ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE,  
USE JOURNAL PROMPTS TO GET STARTED.  
PROMPTS TO CONSIDER:**

- 25 things you are grateful for
- What do you really want right now?
- 25 things you are interested in learning more about
- A list of things you love to do



## 3. REFRAME THE SITUATION

Change is a part of life. When we can accept that change is inevitable, we are more flexible and better able to respond to stressful events. Flexibility is essential to being resilient and managing the ups and downs in life. Simply accepting that life will have challenges will help you be more resilient.

In her book *Loving What Is*, Byron Katie explains that what we think shouldn't have happened, should have happened, and that everything is happening for you and not to you [6]. Viewing circumstances through this lens helps reframe challenges into learning opportunities.

## 4. CULTIVATE SELF-COMPASSION

Often misconstrued as self-pity, self-compassion means to feel kindness and caring towards yourself and being non-judgemental to what you may perceive as your own inadequacies. Self-compassion has been shown to increase well-being and resilience to stress and trauma [7]. It is linked to healthier behaviors and increases confidence and a sense of personal responsibility. Self-compassion has also been shown to increase motivation for self-improvement [8].

Cultivate more self-compassion by letting go of judgements of past mistakes and perceived inadequacies. If you find it difficult to speak kindly to yourself, imagine you are speaking to a loved one or dear friend. Be easier on yourself and leave perfectionism behind.



## 5. FOSTER POSITIVE CONNECTIONS

Connecting with supportive and understanding people can help you feel less alone, which is especially important in difficult situations. This can come in the form of one-on-one friendships, group settings or a licensed mental health professional. A 2019 study showed that sharing positive experiences in social connections boosts resilience [9].

Social support from your community can help enhance your resilience as an individual. Knowing that there are policies and organizations to support you can help you feel more secure in stressful situations and foster your personal resilience. These include programs that promote safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, food and employment stability, access to healthcare and emergency relief [10].

## 6. BE KIND

Demonstrating kindness to others can help us feel better and improve resilience.

A 2003 study found that older adults who volunteer report higher levels of well-being and that well-being increased with increased volunteer hours [11]. Even when we are suffering ourselves, research shows that altruism born of suffering can help us become stronger and more empathetic towards others [12]. Another study in 2016 had some participants do kind acts for others and another group do kind acts for themselves. The group who helped others had higher positive emotions and mood elevation [13].

So, if you would like to build resilience in yourself, being kind to others is a great way to do that by fostering a greater sense of purpose and enhancing self-worth.





## 7. OVERCOME YOUR FEARS

Fears can sometimes interfere with daily life, like the fear of public speaking, fear of heights or being afraid of cats or dogs, causing anxiety and shrinking resilience. To help overcome everyday fears that get in the way of experiencing life, try slowly and repeatedly exposing yourself to your fear in small doses, eventually increasing the exposure until the fear has been resolved.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a more serious type of fear resulting from traumatic situations. With PTSD, it is common to re-experience the event through flashbacks and emotional reactions. Often the person avoids triggering situations or reminders, but research suggests that therapy designed to help the person gradually revisit the trauma in a controlled way can significantly improve PTSD symptoms and build resilience [3]. If this is an avenue you would like to explore, look for a licenced professional specializing in prolonged exposure (PE) therapy. This website can help you find a specialist in your area:

[https://www.med.upenn.edu/ctsa/find\\_pe\\_therapist.html](https://www.med.upenn.edu/ctsa/find_pe_therapist.html)

Another therapy with great success in treating PTSD is eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). This is a psychotherapy technique in which the patient recalls a traumatic event while doing bilateral stimulation with the eyes. Find a therapist licenced in EMDR with the directory provided here:

<https://www.emdria.org/find-a-therapist/>



## 8. FORGIVE AND MOVE ON

Forgiveness is beneficial for both emotional and physical health and is key to building resilience. Many of us carry emotional pain from past hurts, lowering well-being as the continual surges of adrenaline and cortisol produced from these memories flood the body. Sometimes current situations may trigger an unresolved childhood wound, repeating the emotional pain of the past.

*“The trauma of childhood becomes the drama of adulthood.”*  
– Harville Hendrix [14]

It can be difficult to forgive, but with practiced empathy and compassion it is possible. When we can begin to see events from the offender’s point of view, we can understand the behavior. Understanding is different than condoning the behavior, and reconciling is not necessary. The goal is to find compassion, to know that none of us are perfect and eventually find peace.

When we practice compassion and forgiveness of others, we also become more forgiving of our own mistakes and shortcomings, further building resilience.




### TO GROW RESILIENCE THROUGH FORGIVENESS, TRY THESE PRACTICES:

- Consider how not forgiving is impacting your health and happiness – forgive for your own sake.
- Reflect on what pushes your buttons. This may help identify old childhood wounds.
- Accept others as they are: imperfect beings struggling to do the best they can under their conditions and circumstances [15].
- Practice the Loving Kindness meditation. Many versions are available online. Here is one you could try: <https://www.mindful.org/this-loving-kindness-meditation-is-a-radical-act-of-love/>

If you need help forgiving the past, consider working with a licensed professional therapist.

## 9. SET GOALS

Taking steps toward a goal has been shown to promote positive emotion and clearer thinking, building overall well-being and resilience. In a 2015 study of applied goal-directed resilience in training (GRIT), participants demonstrated improvement in self-regulation, executive function and personal growth [16]. When situations feel overwhelming, build resilience by brainstorming possible solutions, coming up with a plan of action and breaking this down into manageable steps. Reward yourself for making progress by recognizing your achievements along the way. While pursuing your goal, situations may change, so give yourself permission to revise your goals as you progress. Consider working with a health coach to help you brainstorm, co-create goals and help hold you accountable to those goals. To find coaches that have met the field's highest standards, look for a National Board Certified Health & Wellness coach here: <https://nbhwc.org/find-a-certified-coach/>.



A goal without a plan  
is just a wish!

# 10. BREATHE

Breathing mindfully, deeply and slowly can help lower stress, which in turn builds resilience. Mindful breathing involves focusing attention on the physical sensations of the breath, such as the sound of the breath, movement of air through the nostrils, expansion of the belly and the rise and fall of the chest. With slow and deep breathing, the diaphragm moves up and down with minimal movement in the chest, stimulating the vagus nerve and improving communication in the autonomic nervous system. Mindful breathing is a great way to help put your autonomic nervous system into the rest-digest-repair mode. Mindful breathing can help improve memory, mental cognition, emotional regulation and sense of well-being [17].



A 2021 study of health care workers in India during the COVID 19 pandemic found that participants who practiced yogic breathing experienced lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression and reported significant improvements in life satisfaction, resilience and quality of sleep [18].

Another study evaluated the effectiveness of daily mindful breathing on test anxiety in university students. The participants were taught how to breathe mindfully, then continued with 30 minutes of daily mindful breathing on their own for one week. The study concluded that daily mindful breathing significantly lowered test anxiety [19].

Breathing is closely linked with bodily and mental functions. Actively slowing down breath frequency to less than 10 breaths per minute affects the autonomic and central nervous systems activities, promoting an increase in heart-rate variability (HRV) and central nervous system activities controlling emotions and psychophysiological well-being [20]. High HRV is associated with improved overall health and improved cognitive function.

Try this simple deep breathing technique, 4-7-8 breathing. Begin by exhaling completely by squeezing the abdomen. Then inhale deep into the belly for a count of four, pushing the belly button outward. Hold the breath for a count of seven then gently and slowly release the breath through the mouth for a count of eight, pulling the belly button toward the spine. It might help to imagine the belly as a balloon inflating and deflating with each inhale and exhale. Notice the sound and feel of the breath as air moves in and out of the body.

# 11. DO THINGS YOU ENJOY

It sounds obvious, but when life gets busy, we often let recreational enjoyment slip. Participating in activities you enjoy increases positive emotions and life satisfaction, which are both associated with higher resilience [21]. If you find yourself wondering what to do, think back to activities you enjoyed as a child. A 2017 review found that arts activities were associated with developing resilience and mental well-being in children [22]. Build on that resilience by engaging in art activities or any other recreation that makes you feel relaxed and happy.

# 12. GET MINDFUL

Mindfulness is simply non-judgemental awareness of the present moment. To cultivate mindfulness, purposefully pay attention to things that would ordinarily not get your attention [23]. Mindfulness can be cultivated with mindful breathing, as previously mentioned, but can also be developed while participating in daily activities like showering, eating and walking, for example. Simply “noticing what you’re noticing” with one or more of your senses is a great way to become more mindful.

Mindfulness can help lower symptoms of depression. A 2015 study using a mindfulness-based program (along with nutrition and exercise) showed depressed health care professionals had lowered depression, stress, anxiety and work absenteeism after eight weeks [24].

The eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program teaches participants a variety of meditation practices, like the Body Scan Meditation by Jon Kabat-Zinn available on YouTube. Many studies have shown that MBSR has a host of benefits on physical and mental well-being [25].



Try being more mindful throughout your day, or participate in a structured mindfulness program to help lower stress and improve resilience.

## 13. NURTURE WITH NUTRITION

Foods that are less than healthy cause inflammation in the body and contribute to stress overall. When we are stressed, we are less resilient and our health suffers [26]. Diet is usually associated with physical health, but it is also connected to emotional well-being and psychological resilience [27].

Eating healthy foods is associated with better mental health than the typical Western diet [28]. New research shows that the gut microbiome influences mood and stress resilience [29]. Consume a diet high in fruits and vegetables, quality proteins and quality fats to promote physical and mental health and support a robust microbiome.

## 14. ENERGIZE WITH ESSENTIAL OILS

Essential oils don't just smell wonderful, they can have a therapeutic benefit on our physical and mental well-being by balancing hormones and emotions. By regulating neurotransmitters, essential oils impact how you think and function and can influence mood, memory, self-esteem, anxiety and motivation [30]. A growing amount of data shows that essential oils enhance immune function [31], which aids in building a more resilient body.

Essential oils associated with improved immune function are eucalyptus and ginger [31]. Use on their own in a diffuser or combine with a carrier oil such as coconut oil and apply directly to the skin.



# 15. GET BETTER SLEEP

When feeling stressed, sleep quantity and quality often slips. Studies have found a direct correlation between insomnia, sleep duration and health outcomes as indicators of resilience [32]. To be resilient, we need quality sleep.

To improve sleep quality, start by creating a sleep-promoting environment. Use the bedroom only for sleep. Ensure that the room is dark, quiet and the right temperature – not too hot or too cold.

Practice proper sleep hygiene. While not proven to be a cure for insomnia, good sleep hygiene can help improve sleep quality and help lessen fatigue caused by poor sleep [33].

## TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF SLEEP, TRY THESE SLEEP HYGIENE PRACTICES:

- Set a regular sleep schedule.
- Wind down 60-120 minutes before bedtime by avoiding screens or stimulating activities.
- Dim lights after dark.
- Avoid exposure to blue light from electronics – blue-light-blocking glasses can help [34].



## 16. MOVE WITH PHYSICAL EXERCISE

Physical movement has many health-promoting effects and is a pathway to resilience. Exercise also promotes resilience through hardiness and mental toughness [35]. Key to psychological well-being, physical exercise can impact depression, anxiety, stress responsivity, mood, self-esteem and body image [36], all of which are related to personal resilience. Exercise can also help improve sleep. Just 30 minutes of physical movement a day is significantly associated with increased sleep efficiency [37].

Find something you love to do and set a regular time to do it. Having an accountability partner will help you commit to regular activity. Or sign up for a class either online or in person. Even small increases in physical activity can have a significant impact on your health and quality of life [38].

## 17. SPEND TIME IN NATURE

We all feel better in nature. Sights, sounds, smells and textures of nature all have positive effects on the body and the brain, whether in the wilderness, a cultivated garden or simply viewed from a balcony [39]. Numerous studies have linked exposure to natural environment with positive health effects [40]. As little as one hour in nature or a garden setting increases positive emotions and has a restorative effect [41].

Combine walking in nature with community by participating in a group walk. A 2019 study showed that group walks in nature can help undo the negative effects of stress and depression, have a positive effect on mental well-being and grow resilience [42].



## 18. YOGA

Yoga is a 3000-year-old Eastern practice of mind-body-spirit fitness combining muscular activity and an internally directed awareness of the self, the breath and energy. Regular practice of yoga promotes strength, endurance, calmness and well-being, and also cultivates a sense of friendliness, compassion, improved self-control and improved resilience [43].

Participants in a six-week yoga program in a 2011 study showed significant improvements in feelings of clear-mindedness, composure, energy and confidence as well as increased life purpose and satisfaction and greater feelings of self-confidence in stressful situations [44].



## 19. TRY EFT TAPPING

Emotional freedom techniques (EFT) can help promote calm and resilience. EFT is an alternative treatment which has been used to treat people with anxiety and physical pain.

Like acupuncture, EFT tapping works with energy meridian points on the body. These points are tapped with the fingertips in a sequence along with reciting a phrase as a reminder of the concern being addressed.

EFT in a clinical setting has been found to improve multiple markers of health [45], reduce anxiety [46], treat depression [47] and is effective in the treatment of PTSD [48]. A 2016 study of veterans considered at risk for PTSD found that EFT used as a self-help method is an effective resiliency tool [49].

EFT International provides a directory of certified practitioners at [eftinternational.org](http://eftinternational.org). Also consider using EFT as a self-help tool with a free app, The Tapping Solution, available at [thetappingsolution.com](http://thetappingsolution.com).



## 20. LAUGH MORE

As the saying goes, “laughter is the best medicine” and is also a great way to build resilience. Studies on laughter therapy have shown that laughter is an effective treatment for stress, anxiety and depression [50]. The benefits may apply whether the laughter is spontaneous or self-induced. A 2014 study of laughter yoga, simulated laughter followed by deep breathing, found that participants had a decrease in blood pressure and cortisol levels [51]. Another study of breast cancer survivors found that laughter therapy increased quality of life and resilience [52].

Consider giving yourself a “laughter prescription” including frequency, intensity and length of time [53]. Think about the type of activity that will help you laugh. For example, it may be a funny television show, or watching a comedian or with laughter yoga. The best thing about laughter is that it is free and has only positive side effects, including improving resilience.





**HERE'S  
TO HEALTH.**

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