

Building your personal resilience to reduce stress

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." (Viktor Frankl)

Why does developing greater resilience matter? We are all under increasing amounts of pressure both at work and in our personal lives. As these mount we can either use them as a positive spur or we might find them building up to make us begin to feel stressed. A major project was carried out in the pharmaceutical giant, GSK. They addressed resilience for both individuals and teams. When they wanted to assess the effectiveness of the project, the results were:

- ✓ *Work related mental ill-health down by 60%*
- ✓ *Reported pressure due to work/life conflicts fell by 25%*
- ✓ *Staff satisfaction with the company increased by 21%*
- ✓ *14% increase in willingness among staff to experiment with new work practices*

Recent research suggests that the numbers of us who are feeling stressed are increasing. It depends which source you want to believe, but the general figures come out between 40 – 50% of the working population. You have some choices if you are getting caught in this trend. This article will provide you with some ideas which you can follow through and implement for yourself to be more resilient.

What is resilience? There are a number of definitions or ideas about the meaning. Resilience can be thought of as our ability to bounce back, or even grow, in the face of pressures and threats. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the ability to adapt in the face of adversity, trauma or tragedy. The GSK project had a slightly fuller definition, especially relevant for the workplace. *"Resilience is the ability to be successful, personally and professionally, in a highly- pressured, fast-paced and continuously changing environment"*. If you choose to become more resilient you will find that you can handle pressure differently and will feel much better and more empowered. You will have the attitudes and behaviours of resilient people: Confidence; focused and organised; adaptable; proactive; energetic.

A key element in building your personal resilience lies in your thinking! Your thinking triggers your emotions which then influence your behaviour. Many people faced with increasing pressures will respond in a hopeless or helpless manner. If you ever find yourself with either of these feelings – it's time to work on developing your resilience! What you need to realise is that you have choice about your thoughts and consequently your attitude and behaviour. These thoughts are an outcome of something close to your "core" – your beliefs and values. We all have a collection of beliefs including both empowering and limiting. In this context, beliefs are generalisations we hold about life and ourselves. We develop these throughout our lives, with input and influences from many of the people we encounter from parents through to work colleagues to friends. Our empowering beliefs are the "can do" messages we have, "I can do.....", "It's OK for me to....." and ones like that. When we are living to our empowering beliefs we will tend to be happier and feel more positive – and be more resilient when pressure builds. Our limiting beliefs are just that, they limit what we might be able to do. They are not necessarily negative because underneath them is usually a positive intention. We can recognise our limiting beliefs when we are thinking or saying things such as, "I can't.....", "It's not OK.....", "I must.....", "I have to....." which will hold us back or stop us doing things.

Too many limiting beliefs will lead to feelings of hopelessness or helplessness in the face of mounting pressure. To develop your resilience it is important to be aware of the main limiting beliefs you hold – and work out what would be better to think instead. Generate

some alternatives which are empowering. Remember, these are your own personal property!! You can choose what beliefs you want to have.

Another “thinking” element to understand when exploring your response to pressure is the very human habit of revisiting past experiences. The power of precedent can be strong! Do recognise, that was then, now is now! You have choice about whether to respond in the way you used to, or do you want to choose a different option? At the end of the day, your thinking will drive your attitudes to how you want to handle pressure. Your attitudes can also influence whether certain pressures will even occur, especially those generated by other people.

When pressure is leading to feelings of stress it will affect your behaviours. There will be physical symptoms which might include: poor sleeping patterns; loss of appetite; stomach problems; headaches and tension. Other clues can be in the way you carry yourself, your posture and other elements of your physiology. When feeling under pressure or stressed others may notice that your shoulders might be down, slightly bent into a “C” shape, head down, avoiding eye contact and possibly your voice is flatter. Interacting with others you might withdraw and have minimal contact, become irritable and argumentative, reacting in a hypersensitive manner and communicating poorly.

To build your personal resilience you need to recognise when any of these symptoms are happening to you. You can then choose to react in a resilient manner – or succumb to the pressure and allow yourself to begin feeling stressed. A way of achieving resilience is to apply a process referred to as cognitive restructuring.

The A-B-C model can be used to represent this concept, based on “A” being the activating event and “C” the consequences (feelings and behaviour) that occur in relation to the activating event. Cognitive restructuring concerns changing the “B” component of the model, the beliefs that occur between the activating event (“A”) and the consequences (“C”).

When faced with increasing pressure you can respond in a resilient way by applying the following ideas. Consider changing your thinking about the pressures you are facing. Keep them in perspective by using thoughts such as, “how important will this be in 6 months, 3years (or whatever)?”; “What is the worst that can happen?” A critical element for handling pressure resiliently is to recognise that it is your own thoughts about it which dictate your response – influenced by your own beliefs. So, when faced with some specific pressures learn to view them from a different perspective and accept you are in charge of how you will respond. To help you with taking this approach take control of your “self-talk”. Pay attention to these messages you give yourself as they will influence your response to the pressure and your behaviour.

A further step to take to enhance your personal resilience is to make sure your behaviour projects a positive message. Stand tall, hold eye contact when interacting with others, keep gestures to a minimum. There is a close link between your behaviour and non-verbal messages with what your internal thoughts and self-talk are doing. Even if you have some elements of doubt in your response to the pressures, get your behaviour and non-verbal messages to send out a positive, resilient message. It will help you to think differently and also be noticed by others.

To reduce the chances of becoming stressed apply the ideas outlined above and you will become more resilient and better able to handle pressure. You will feel more capable and confident and act in a more positive manner. Do remember you have choice about your thoughts and behaviours! You can be a role model for others when they are feeling under pressure. To help yourself with achieving personal resilience it is good to mix with positive,

resilient people whenever you can. They can help provide you with positive energy and thoughts, which in turn leads to increasing your personal resilience.

A related cognitive-behavioural technique is cognitive restructuring, which is based on the premise that many people believe other people or events outside of themselves are responsible for how they feel and behave.

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