Building Resilience: How to Shift Mental Gears

If we view challenges as stressful setbacks, there’s an opportunity to shift our perspective and grow from our experiences.

BY MARK BERTIN

Imagine two equally talented graduates at their first job. Within a year, both are laid off due to downsizing. One becomes caught up in thinking he’s failed: “I was never good enough, my boss hated me.” The other decides, “I wanted this job so badly, I better fix my resume and learn how to deal with a difficult boss better.” Who do you think moves through adversity more quickly?

Our perspective toward whatever we encounter in life fundamentally changes how we experience it.

Redefining Stressful Setbacks

Stress itself can be defined as the perception that something is more than we can handle. When we frame challenges as surmountable, we more easily surmount them (or at least begin to work our way forward). When we frame them as opportunities for failure, we more easily fail. That may sound like the most hackneyed, clichéd advice ever—but it is a foundation of resilience research.

Resilience relies on how we perceive our lives. So maybe we get queasy watching our child on stage for the first time; anxious and concerned, we start ruminating. Within
those thoughts exist layers of assumptions, perspectives, and mental filters: *I didn’t prepare her enough, she’s going to embarrass herself, I must do something to save her.* If we feel our role is to protect kids from *everything*, that moment on stage becomes miserable. If we recognize we cannot shield our children from every hurt but we’ve done our best, the experience changes: *I’m almost as stressed as she is! Hope it goes well, but I’m here if it doesn’t.*

Perception itself is malleable—a focus of the military’s resilience training for soldiers. Participants explore mental traps—habitual distortions that undermine emotional well-being. These “icebergs” can be as simple as thinking *asking for help is an admission of failure.* They might include catastrophizing the worst possible outcome of every situation, or alternatively, minimizing and ignoring whatever overwhelms. One might be an overly active inner critic, letting us know we are not good enough to manage. All represent filters that twist perspective and pull us away from resiliency.

With mindfulness practice, we learn to hold these patterns to the light and question ourselves: What is valid, if anything, and what isn’t useful? Is our view inflexible, reactive, or full of doubt? Without belittling ourselves or forcing ourselves to be unnaturally positive, we observe with curiosity, and redirect ourselves until new habits develop. *Right, she’s on her own up on stage now; I’m nervous but need to let go. It’s not that every challenge leads to growth; it’s more that whatever happens, we’ll get through it somehow.*

Uncertainty and change are inevitable in life. But if the only relief we seek is striving to battle uncertainty into submission, that causes needless stress since certainty never happens—and too much stress changes not only how we feel but the choices we make day to day.

When we try to fix all we face and reach for a perfect picture of happiness, we often undermine our best intentions. There’s a time for action, but quite often there’s benefit from pausing and letting things be. We can shift our perspective to accept that not
knowing everything and every outcome for sure is the norm. The perception that life can be anything other than uncertain and changing pushes us far from our most skillful and resilient selves.

Mindfulness Practice: 10 Ways to Build Resilience into Your Day

1) Pay attention to how you experience challenges. We often add to unpleasant moments in ways that make them even more difficult. Note how your body feels, your emotions, and where your thoughts go. Are you projecting difficulty years into the future? Are you caught up in regret or resentment? Also, begin to separate your perspective (This shouldn’t be! Nothing ever changes. I should be able to manage this on my own) from the experience itself. Children learn more from what you do than what you say, so your resilience—the way they watch you approach adversity—affects theirs.

2) Pay attention to your attitudes around setbacks. Many attitudes toward adversity seem like factual statements. Those people are like that. My child will never …. I’m not the sort of person who ever …. Notice those habitual thoughts, and ask of them, Is it true? Recognize your assumptions and predictions for what they are and see if anything changes when you open to other possibilities.

3) Catch yourself with the STOP practice: When feeling off-balance because of a challenging situation, pause. Stop whatever you’re doing; take a few slow breaths; observe what’s going on around you and in your mind; and then pick how to proceed.

4) Insert mindful moments into your day to build resilience. These suggestions, adapted from recommendations of the American Psychological Association, provide a framework for shifting perceptions and building resilience:

5) Make connections and accept help. Value relationships with close family members and friends, and reach out for support when needed.
6) **Monitor for mental traps.** Whatever your mental icebergs, pause, label them (*catastrophizing again*), and redirect. For example, if you feel shut down by fear, acknowledge that fact, then refocus on something useful to be done as a first step. *If nothing else, I’m calling the pediatrician today and getting a referral.*

7) **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Catch your inner critic in action, set it aside, and focus on your own strengths instead. *Thanks anyway, I wish I’d done it differently but I didn’t. What would be the best thing to do now?*

8) **Aim to accept that change and uncertainty are a part of living.** One common misperception that undermines well-being and resilience is fighting with whatever is truly beyond our control. Even when something upsetting happens, separate the experience from a broader expectation that it ‘shouldn’t’ have happened in the first place.

9) **Develop step-by-step goals and take decisive action.** Rather than detaching and wishing stress away, stay proactive. When tasks seem unachievable, ask, *What’s one small thing I can accomplish that moves me in the direction I want to go?*

10) **Take care of yourself.** Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed for resilience.