

First Aid Resilience

Resilience is the ability to withstand, deal with, and/or recover from difficult situations. It includes our capacity to make the best of things, cope with stress and rise to the occasion.



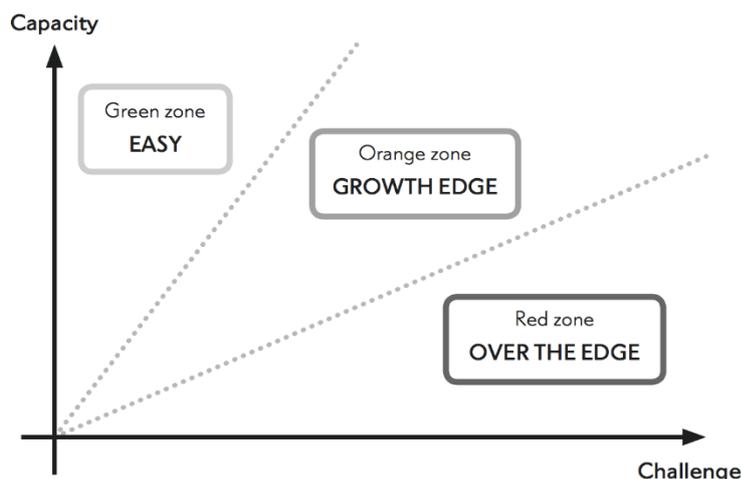
We all have this ability, though not always as much as we'd like. Some days we can face a challenge and cope well, while other days we may face the same challenge but struggle.

This booklet accompanies a half-day workshop. It will give you an overview of resilience and share a variety of tools that can be put into practice straightaway to help you cope with stress, prevent burnout and find a way forward. Research shows resilience training improves mental health.

- Resilience is something you can learn, it's not just something you're born with.
- Resilience is "ordinary magic". An everyday rather than extraordinary capacity.
- There are many routes to resilience from talking to a friend to challenging pessimism.
- Going through tough times can test your resilience but can also strengthen it.

Three Zones of Challenge

Resilience is the balance of your capacity versus the challenge you're facing. It is helpful to think of three zones of challenge.



In the **Green zone** are challenges we find easy to deal with, particularly if we're experienced in that area.

The **Orange zone** refers to challenges that stretch us, but not in a way that feels unmanageable. Working here can be absorbing, satisfying and good for learning.

See p.29, Chris Johnstone Seven Ways to Build Resilience.

The **Red zone** is where we're so over-challenged we experience distress and struggle to cope. We may panic or feel overwhelmed. The graph below shows why we do resilience training - we're looking at what strengthens capacity, so that red zone situations become more orange, or orange situations become more green.

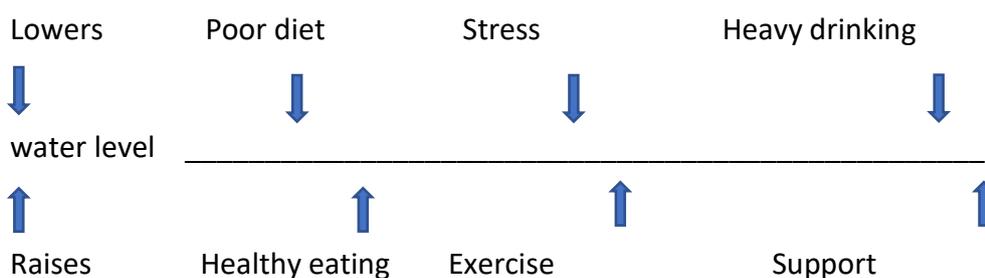
Every time you find yourself in the Orange or Red zone, experiment with the idea that this is an opportunity to practise using resilience tools. Ask yourself 'what would resilience look like here? What tools might help me?' and then use those tools.

Mapping Resilience: The Boat and Water Level Process

This practice comes from *Seven Ways to Build Resilience* by Dr Chris Johnstone (Robinson, 2019). Draw a horizontal line to represent the 'water level' of your resilience or well-being.

Identify any background factors, specific to you, that have a negative effect on your well-being. Include the minor stresses as well as the major. Represent these by drawing arrows pushing the line downwards.

Then identify any background factors that have a positive influence on your well-being. Represent these by drawing arrows pushing the water level line upwards (as in the example below). Anything that lifts the line strengthens or supports well-being.



Now do yours: Please draw in upward or downward arrows here to represent factors you recognise that influence your well-being. Then identify areas you can give attention to that might help your well-being grow.

Things that reduce or undermine my well-being include:





Things that support or strengthen my well-being include:

Are there any specific practical steps you can take to raise your water level?

Are there any downward arrows you can remove or reduce or find ways to counter?

Are there any upward arrows you can give more attention to so that they grow stronger?

Positive Coping

When a crisis hits, your first line of defence is your coping style. People generally use one of three forms of coping – **emotion-focused coping**, **problem-focused coping** or **avoidant coping**. It's worth getting to know which style of coping you favour as there are advantages and disadvantages to each as you can see in the chart below

Emotion-focused coping is when your attention is on dealing with the emotional distress caused by the crisis rather than on resolving it. Not every crisis has a solution to it, of course, or is within our control such as in the case of a bereavement, so finding a way to deal with the pain might be the sensible option. Emotion-focused coping includes talking things through with a confidante or counsellor, the emotional release of crying and drawing on support from friends and family.

1. Emotion-focused Positive	2. Problem-focused Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing emotions Talking things through Leaning on friends for support Crying - emotional discharge Using exercise & relaxation  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a realistic action plan Accepting responsibility Seeking accurate information Using optimism 
Negative	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking meaningless support Taking stress too seriously Aggression Alcohol & drug abuse Embarking on toxic relationships  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Procrastination Developing unrealistic plans Not following through on strategies Pessimism 

What often works well is to attend to overwhelming emotions first and then when you feel calmer and have a clearer head you'll be in a better position to make plans and move forward. This is the essence of **problem-focused coping** where your attention is on what steps you can take to resolve the issue. It's a more active form of coping, appropriate for calamities in which you can exercise some control such as in the case of a business failure. By taking on the responsibility and coming up with a plan of action, you have a map to help you move forward. While it's important to manage the emotions involved, eventually it will pay off to develop more of a problem-focused strategy so that you can pick up the pieces and begin the journey forwards.

3. Avoidant Coping
Positive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Temporarily mentally disengaging from the problem Temporarily engaging in distracting activities Temporarily engaging in distracting relationships 
Negative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentally disengaging from the problem for the long term Long-term engagement in distracting activities Long-term engagement in distracting relationships 

The third style of coping, **avoidance-coping**, is as the name suggests about blocking the crisis out and engaging in distractions. Denying the existence of a problem sounds like an all-around negative but in the short-term it can serve a positive purpose as a distraction that can help you regroup before tackling the issue. This depends on

choosing a healthy distraction like seeking out social activities rather than something unhealthy such as drowning your sorrows. Over the long term though you are better off facing up to the issue and finding a way of managing it rather than turning a blind eye and risking things getting worse.

Emotional First Aid

Feeling distressed can be a normal healthy response to distressing situations. Yet sometimes we can become so distressed that this interferes with our capacity to respond. Emotional First-Aid involves doing something in a short space of time that helps bring you back to a more settled and steady state. Using the body is a good way to switch from the sympathetic nervous system (stress response) to the parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digestion).

The Four Count Breath or 'Box Breathing' is a relaxation technique that aims to return breathing to its normal rhythm. This breathing exercise may help to clear the mind, relax the body, and improve focus.

1. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose while counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.
2. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Try not to clamp your mouth or nose shut. Simply avoid inhaling or exhaling for 4 seconds.
3. Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds.
4. Repeat steps 1 to 3 at least three times. Ideally, repeat the three steps for 4 minutes, or until calm returns.

The 4-7-8 Breathing Technique is a breathing pattern developed by Dr. Andrew Weil, based on an ancient yogic technique called pranayama. When practised regularly, this technique could help some people fall asleep in a shorter period of time.

Find a comfortable place to relax. Rest your tongue against the roof of your mouth, right behind your top front teeth and keep it there during the practice. The following steps should all be carried out in the cycle of one breath:

1. Part your lips. Exhale completely through your mouth making a whooshing sound.
2. Close your lips, inhaling silently through your nose as you count to four in your head.
3. Then, for seven seconds, hold your breath.
4. Make another whooshing exhale from your mouth for eight seconds.

It's recommended that you only practise 4-7-8 breathing for four breaths when you're first starting out. You can gradually work your way up to eight full breaths.

The Five Sense Check-In How you feel is shaped in part by what you give your attention to. If your mind is in a spin, and you can put the brakes on by grounding yourself, giving your attention to your five senses, prompted by the following questions:

What am I seeing? (Look around you.)

What am I hearing? (How many sounds can you hear?)

What can I smell? (Take a big sniff.)

What can I taste? (Allow your tongue to wander round your mouth.)

What can I feel in my body? (What sensations can you feel?)

Once you are more settled, you can review the situation in front of you

Self-compassion

Self-compassion, according to Dr Kristin Neff, involves acting kindly towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don't like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain with a "stiff upper lip" mentality, you stop to tell yourself "this is really difficult right now," how can I comfort and care for myself in this moment? Instead of mercilessly judging and criticising yourself for your shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect? The three elements of self-compassion are:

Self-kindness Being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism. Self-compassionate people recognise that being imperfect, failing, and experiencing life difficulties is inevitable, so they tend to be gentle with themselves when confronted with painful experiences rather than getting angry when life falls short of set ideals. People cannot always be or get exactly what they want. When this reality is denied or fought against suffering increases in the form of stress, frustration and self-criticism. When this reality is accepted with sympathy and kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced. **Tell yourself: This is a moment of suffering: Ouch. This hurts. This is stress.**

Common humanity Frustration at not having things exactly as we want is often accompanied by a sense of isolation – as if "I" were the only person suffering or making mistakes. All humans suffer, however. The very definition of being "human" means that we are mortal, vulnerable and imperfect. Self-compassion involves recognising that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience – something that we all go through rather than something that happens to "me" alone. **Tell yourself: Suffering is a normal part of life. Other people feel this way. I'm not alone. We all struggle in our lives.**

Mindfulness Self-compassion also requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are not suppressed nor exaggerated. This stance stems from the process of relating personal experiences to those of others who are also suffering, putting our own situation into a larger perspective. It also stems from the willingness to observe our negative thoughts and emotions with openness and clarity, so that they are held in mindful awareness. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, receptive mind state in which we observe thoughts and feelings as they are, without trying to suppress or deny them. We cannot ignore our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. At the same time, mindfulness requires that we not be "over-identified" with thoughts and feelings, so that we are caught up and swept away by negative reactivity. **Say: May I be kind to myself, give myself the compassion that I need, learn to accept myself as I am, forgive myself, be strong.**

If you notice the 'crap channel' of negative commentary blaring away, a choice-point available to you is to switch channel. You can find a kinder, more supportive way of talking to yourself, where you notice what's going well, and the positive steps you've taken, as well as encourage yourself to pay attention to your needs and look after yourself. Useful questions to ask yourself are "what might a good friend say to me in a situation like this? Or an encouraging coach?"

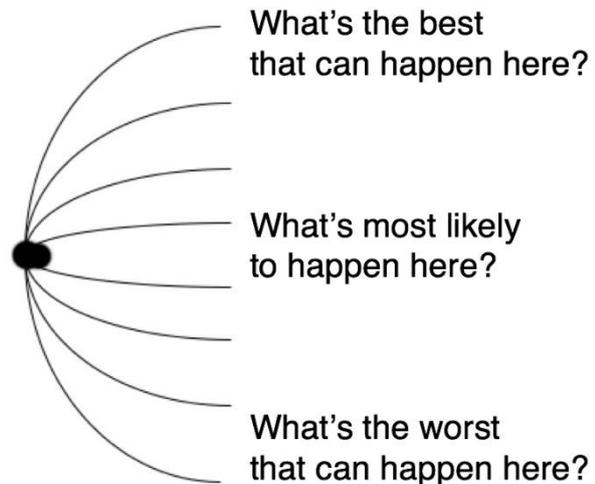
Problem-focused Coping: There's what happens and what happens next.

Problem-focused coping involves taking steps to resolve the problem. This aims to modify the source of stress directly. Whatever you face, there's always different ways a situation can go. This practice comes from *Seven Ways to Build Resilience* by Dr Chris Johnstone (Robinson, 2019).

The body of the spider represents the present moment, then each leg stands for a different way the future can go.

Knowing your situation can work out different ways, it can help to map out the various possibilities. The spider diagram extends this range of possibilities by having different legs for pathways the future might develop in.

It's easy to imagine the worst that might happen so don't linger over this, but imagine what the best might be? Don't restrict yourself in your thinking. Feel free to be wildly positive. After all it's easy to be wildly negative.



What's the worst that might happen?

What's the best that might happen?

What's the most likely thing to happen?

Starting from where you are, facing what you face, what would you like to happen here?
What do you hope for?

What can be done to make your hopes more likely to happen?

Describe some steps you can take to deal with the situation.

ACT, GROW and GRIT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is a cognitive therapy that recognises that living a rich and meaningful life involves accepting the pain that goes with it. People sometimes get stuck, unable to face a difficult reality. The process of positive change begins with accepting that difficult experiences happen. ACT uses mindfulness techniques to help people face rather than avoid negative experiences and choose a course of action to take them forward. While Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is an approach in its own right, the letters ACT can also be used to represent the following course of action.

Acceptance. Facing adversity rather than denying it. **Accepting** your reactions – allowing thoughts to come and go without struggling with them.

Choose a direction – what would you like to happen?

Take action – you can't change what happened but you can change what happens next.

The GROW model is a well-known coaching process used to set goals. Try it out here with a simple (and unrelated) goal to experience how it works.

Goal: What is your goal? Make sure it is an achievable goal. Use SMART to check. (Is it specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound?)

Reality: Where are you now? What have you done to date? How far is there to go?

Options: What could you do to make progress towards the goal?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Will: What will you do? Be specific about the action. When? How?

If-then planning can boost your grit so that you can deal with triggers and avoid the things that derail your good intentions.

- **If** (trigger...) **then** I will.... (action) e.g. **If**... I feel like diving into the biscuit tin, **then**... I'll walk to the water fountain instead.

A story of resilience in six parts

Dr Chris Johnstone, resilience specialist and author of *Seven Ways to Build Resilience* (Robinson, 2019) suggests storyboarding as a way of mapping out the different elements in the journey through adversity. A storyboard can help you both reflect on the situation you face and responses that might help.

1. A situation I'd like to be more resilient in is...
2. If I was more resilient in this situation, what I'd notice that was different is...
3. Obstacles I face are...
What I find difficult is...
4. What helps me here is... (Include the upwards arrows)
5. A positive shift might happen if I...
6. Specific achievable steps I can take in the next 7 days are...

Resources

The First Aid Resilience workshop draws on the work of the following experts. Special thanks to my colleague and friend, Dr Chris Johnstone, who is my go-to on resilience. His work, in particular, has shaped my approach to resilience.

Seven Steps to Build Resilience, Chris Johnstone (Robinson, 2019).

Personal Resilience in an Hour online course via CollegeofWellbeing.com

Positive Psychology for Overcoming Depression, Miriam Akhtar (Watkins, 2018)

Resilience, a practical guide for coaches, Carole Pemberton (McGraw Hill, 2015)

Self Compassion, Dr Kristin Neff (Yellow Kite, 2011)

What is Post-traumatic Growth, Miriam Akhtar (Watkins, 2017)

The Resilience Factor, Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté (Three Rivers Press, 2002)