

Locking onto Our Resilience
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The Pandemic is making us vulnerable.

Suddenly we are all too aware of how fragile everything is—our health, our jobs, our institutions, our way of life. It has forced us to contemplate difficult and scary eventualities.

In doing so, it has wormed its way into a deep groove in our psychological architecture.

We are, it turns out, biologically predisposed to notice threats and to hone in on trouble. Our brain's negativity bias comes from the fact that the costs of missing a threat (I failed to notice the approaching predator) is higher than the costs of a false alarm (I thought it was a predator, but it wasn't).

However, [psychological research](#) over the last few decades has shown convincingly that our default mode is not vulnerability BUT RESILIENCE; the experience of undergoing adversity without suffering debilitating effects.

For example, resilience is at play when at-risk children achieve school success, when people maintain their poise in an emergency, or when survivors heal from trauma.

In other words, resilience is IN OUR NATURE. **We are designed to succeed** and are difficult to disrupt, derail, or decimate.

This is a good thing, for living on earth is hard!

And think of this! If our basic processes were fragile and easily disrupted, our species would probably be extinct by now.

However, psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated our resilience.

For example, Lisa Butler of Stanford University and her colleagues followed over 1,200 individuals for six months after the 9/11 attacks, measuring the

changes in their psychological well-being, levels of distress and emotional suppression, and cognitive outlook (i.e. their positive or negative worldview).

The researchers found that most of those exposed, directly or indirectly, to the collective trauma **were not severely traumatized!** Instead, they exhibited “remarkable resilience.” Another post-9/11 study tracked a sample of over 2,700 New Yorkers for six months following the attack, observing resilience (defined as the absence of any PTSD symptoms) in over 65 percent of the sample.

So...persevering through adversity is not a bug in our software but a feature of the hardware!

However, we may fail to see this for two reasons.

1. First: We are continuously bombarded with bad news that activates our negativity bias and inflames our anxieties. To wit: Plane crashes will always make the news, yet planes that land safely never will. Thus, we may continue to be wary of flying, even though the fact remains that most planes land safely, having endured successfully all manner of turbulence, bad weather, and atrocious food.
2. Second” we wrongly conclude that if most troubled adults have had chaotic childhoods, then most of those who’ve had chaotic childhoods will end up as troubled adults

In fact, most children from dysfunctional homes become functional adults, and most trauma survivors do not develop PTSD. In other words, **resilience is the rule**, not the exception.

So...here are four ways to take advantage of our hard-wired resilience.

1. **Good relationships are our most powerful resilience strategy.** The return-on-investment in nurturing our social relationships (intimate, familial, communal) is higher resilience.
2. **Bend so as not to break.** To that end, accept and face the challenge the world has placed before you.

Instead of reacting from habit, respond from conscious choice. Accept your feelings but consult your values and goals before making decisions.

To cope, assess your situation honestly from a broader perspective. Take the event's true measure in your life.

Finally, observe your thinking. Just as it is unwise to buy the first pair of shoes you see at the store, **so it is unwise to buy the first thought that pops into your head.**

Your mind is a thought store, so shop around, try on some alternative ideas, check the facts, and choose the thought that fits.

3. **Take action.** Rather than avoiding or worrying, which can be self-perpetuating and paralyzing, take problem-solving action.

Focus on those aspects of your situation that are under your control. Seek to solve the solvable problems.

The unsolvable problems? Seek to carry them well. Don't lift the backpack with your teeth.

4. **Take care of yourself.** You cannot light a candle from a blown-out candle. In order to spread your light, you first need to protect your light. Self-care is not selfishness, in the same way that assertiveness is not aggression.

In fact, self-care is our first obligation because if you break down, so does your ability to help others who are broken down. A useful practice to that end is to reflect on those experiences and activities that provide you with moments of meaning, joy, peace, or solace.

Then, become intentional about incorporating those experiences and activities into your routine.

It all comes down to what YOU choose to believe!

Wow!