

## Pause at Work

# How People Learn to Increase Their Resilience

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How do we perceive stress in our lives: as major setbacks or moments of growth? Perception plays a major role in resilience.



When something challenging happens, how well do you recover?

Resilience is the ability to get back up after adversity. Due to the unpredictability of life, there will always be joys and sorrows. Resilient people are able to greet change and difficulty as an opportunity for self-reflection, learning, and growing.

Well-being and resilience are skills one can learn and cultivate. It is such a valuable skill set that world leaders are beginning to recognize its significance. More than 150 world leaders attended the [UN Sustainable Development Summit](#) in September 2015, where they spoke about adopting a new sustainable development agenda, among this agenda was well-being for the world. During the summit, 17 goals were identified, for the next fifteen years, with the aim to guide us towards a more inclusive and sustainable pattern of global development. Our world is awakening to the realization that sustainable world development doesn't just pertain to economic flourishing, but also human flourishing.

[The World Happiness Report](#) supports the concepts of happiness and well-being as an important pathway toward greater sustainable development.

The 2015 report included writings by Dr. Richard Davidson and Brianna Schulyer who presented on the neuroscience of happiness. They described how [well-being is a skill that can be cultivated and trained](#). They defined well-being in terms of four qualities or characteristics:

- 1) Sustained positive emotion
- 2) Resilience
- 3) Empathy, altruism and pro-social behavior (also known as *generosity*)
- 4) Mindful attention

I appreciate how these four characteristics of well-being were listed and substantiated as ways of being that can be trained and cultivated. I consult and teach a lot on the subject of well-being at Stanford University and in worksites. I feel inspired to share more on how to encourage and practice these qualities of well-being in everyday life.

Resilience is a skill I have been told on numerous occasions by friends and colleagues is one of my biggest strengths. I will be sharing more in the months to come on these [four characteristics of well-being](#). Today, I will focus on resilience.

## How do we increase our resilience?

*“I bounce back from set-backs and, if things don’t go according to plan, I make another plan.”*

Resiliency is mostly cultivated from within by how we perceive and then react to stressors.

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Most of life’s stressors are subjective and with mindfulness (seeing things as they are in this present moment), we have the ability to respond with wisdom vs. react in a harmful way. When we see our thoughts and feelings clearly and can offer compassion for the hardship we are experiencing, we increase our resilience.

A [study](#) highlighting the link between mindfulness and resilience in the *Journal of Personality and Individual Differences* found that “Mindful people ... can better cope with difficult thoughts and emotions without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down (emotionally).” Pausing and observing the mind may (help us) resist getting stuck in our story and

as a result empower us to move forward.

Difficult emotions such as fear or anger are not the enemy. It is our reactivity toward these difficult emotions that are most harmful. Often when anger or fear is here, our lower brain is in charge. This is where the fight/flight/freeze response originates and it is responsible for maintaining our survival. The more we go over the scary or angry story, the more anger and/or fear we continue to feel and thus get caught up in reactivity. The lower brain doesn't have control over our actions and when mindfulness is present, we support the higher brain to see the bigger picture with calmness and clarity.

Imagine yourself driving a car, where your higher brain is in the front seat and fight and flight are in the backseat. Fight and Flight are scared and angry saying things like, "Stop, that car almost hit us." "Hey, you BEEPX###, son of a BEEPXX%%##, you just cut me off!"

Your higher brain is in the driver seat and can speak to the lower brain. "I hear you. You guys are welcome to come along for the ride, but I am driving here and we are safe." When mindfulness is present, you can remember that you always have a choice regarding how to respond.

Well-being is our natural state and what we will always strive to return back to.

This meditation was offered by myself at the [Mindfulness and Well-being at work conference](#) this past November, hosted by the [Greater Good Science Center](#). It will help you turn toward emotions with compassion and aid in greater balance at work and home.

# A Mindful Practice

Come into a comfortable and supported seated posture. Begin to bring your awareness inside and slow down the rhythm of your breathing. Acknowledge any event that happened today or this week that was difficult. Select a moderately difficult experience. It is important that we practice with something moderately challenging vs. the most challenging. Bring your awareness to what happened, thoughts, feelings, and let your heart begin to open as you breathe in and out. Turn towards the moderate difficulty with compassion and acceptance.

Repeat these phrases in whatever order or frequency that feels comfortable to you.

*May I be kind to myself.*

*May I find peace and healing.*

*I am doing the best that I can in this moment.*

*May I accept and find ease with things just as they are.*

Often, when life is difficult, we can be overly critical and hard on ourselves, but compassion, not criticism, facilitates greater resiliency at home and work. I teach more on the skills for creating well being in my Stanford University and online course, “[Mindfully Nourished](#)”. Enrollment for the course begins in March.

With compassion, we can turn toward the difficult thoughts and emotions and then get back on track with our next wise move.