

How to build resilience and boost your mental health

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Wave after wave of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is taking a heavy toll on our collective mental health, causing depression and anxiety.

"Everyone's going through it: the amount of fear and anxiety, the fragility of life, people wondering about their own well-being and what happens if they get sick and how quickly things can change on a dime," said Suzette Brémault-Phillips, associate professor in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Alberta.

"There's a sense of vulnerability."

No one can predict the future, but there is one thing you can do to better prepare yourself for whatever the next stage of the pandemic might look like: develop your resilience.

Brémault-Phillips knows just how important resilience is for maintaining [mental health](#) and overall well-being. She works with military members, veterans, first responders, their families and others to help them cope with their unique challenges and traumas.

You don't have to completely revamp your routine to make a positive change, she noted.

"These things seem so small—going for a walk, getting out in the sunshine, expressing gratitude, lending a helping hand—and yet what it does is it actually changes our biochemistry and our thinking processes. It gives us a break and enables us to look at things in a different way."

Brémault-Phillips shares seven simple tips to build up your resilience and improve your mental health and well-being.

Evaluate your environment—and make a few tweaks

If you dread sitting down at your remote workstation in a gloomy, windowless corner of your home every day, it's time to evaluate your environment to see what can be changed. Brémault-Phillips suggests

finding ways to make your surroundings more uplifting: place a few plants near your workspace, let your pet settle in as your co-worker for the day, or play some of your favorite music.

Another key component in your environment is the amount of light you're getting on a regular basis. Switch up your office configuration so you're facing a window. Take a midday break to walk outside in the sunshine. Or invest in a "SAD lamp," which simulates sunlight to alleviate seasonal affective disorder.

Take care of your physical health

Your physical health is just as important as your mental health when it comes to developing your resilience, according to Brémault-Phillips. Simple things like going for a walk or doing an at-home workout, getting enough sleep every night and choosing healthy foods are critical for your resilience.

"We know exercise works. We know sleep is imperative. We know eating properly makes a difference," said Brémault-Phillips. "If we don't take care of those little things, if one building block flips, all of a sudden the rest of the tower starts to collapse. It's the same thing with our well-being and our health."

Get out in nature

Spending time outdoors helps our well-being in a number of ways, giving us a dose of sunlight, some exercise and a bit of a mental break. If you can't bring yourself to head out into a cold winter day, Brémault-Phillips offers an alternative.

In winter months, she places a treadmill in front of a screen showing a

nature scene. "We know that being out in nature can be really helpful, so when we're housebound or not able to go outside because of the weather, to be able to exercise while we're doing something enjoyable, running around a lake virtually, those things are really important."

Look for the silver linings

If you've picked up the habit of doomscrolling, memorizing all the numbers and statistics and details about the latest wave of COVID-19, it can seem like your Twitter feed or conversations are a black cloud with no relief in sight. Take a moment to reframe the situation and see whether you can bring a different mindset to it, to find a hint of sunshine peeking through.

"Also be aware. Make informed decisions and respond to different situations rather than just reacting to them," said Brémault-Phillips. "Be a little bit flexible in your thinking, not thinking the worst all the time, but choosing to see what might be good in a situation, however unfortunate it may be. Take time for reflection and meaning-making, and engage in things that align with your values and give you a sense of purpose."

Reach out to others

"One really important part of resilience is that it isn't just about the individual. It's really about the collective," said Brémault-Phillips. Over the course of the pandemic, social circles have contracted and feelings of loneliness have plagued many people, from children to older adults.

Take advantage of all the digital tools that are accessible and find a way to reach out to others, whether that involves going for a walk "with" a friend, scheduling a Zoom game night with extended family or hopping

on the phone for a quick chat.

"We're not built to be alone. There needs to be an intentionality about connection."

Reconnect with your playful side

Whether you're a devoted gamer or someone who hasn't touched a console since you were a child, consider exploring some of the many games available. "Video games and virtual reality can be really connecting," said Brémault-Phillips. "Engaging in parallel or collaborative games is also good, be that video games, a virtual puzzle, Scrabble, whatever someone may be able to do."

As director of the U of A-led Heroes in Mind, Advocacy and Research Consortium (HiMARC), she helps deliver immersive [virtual reality](#) therapy to military members and veterans as well as front-line health workers and others who have experienced trauma as a result of the pandemic.

Take advantage of ready-made resources

At this point in the pandemic, you're likely well versed in Zoom and all the video chatting platforms available, but take time to explore a few other offerings that may be able to help you develop resilience.

Brémault-Phillips, who is also a member of the Neuroscience and Mental Health Institute, suggests checking out the [Text4Hope](#) app, developed at the U of A, for a daily check-in delivered straight to your phone. The Mental Health Commission of Canada's [Continuum Self Check](#) or the [Road to Mental Readiness](#) app, used within the Canadian military, are helpful tools. There are also apps to help you develop the

habit of mindfulness, to learn to meditate, to guide you through workout routines and more.

That said, Brémault-Phillips cautions that the apps can help but can only do so much. Engaging with and taking care of friends, families and communities is vital.

"The rest is really about who each of us is and how we choose to connect—the things we can do to take care of one another in bumpy, rough times."

It's also important to reach out for support, she said, noting that Wellness Together Canada provides high-quality resources to improve the health and wellness of all Canadians, and mental [health](#) and addiction services are a phone call or text away.

"We can all get through this ... together!"

Provided by University of Alberta

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