

What is resilience? A psychologist explains the main ingredients that help people manage stress

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Much like learning the skills to climb a mountain—or any other form of physical activity—resilience can be developed. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The word [resilience](#) can be perplexing. Does it mean remaining calm

when faced with stress? Bouncing back quickly? Growing from adversity? Is resilience an attitude, a character trait or a skill set? And can misperceptions about resilience hurt people, rather than help?

To sum it up in a sentence: Resilience is the ability to [manage stress in effective ways](#). It's not a static quality or attribute you're born with, or a choice of attitude. Instead, it's a set of skills that can be developed by repeating specific behaviors. [As a clinical psychologist, researcher and educator](#) specializing in training people to cope with stress more effectively, I know that [resilience can be developed](#).

But as with physical fitness, you can't get stronger abs by just wanting them. Instead, you have to repeat specific exercises that make your abs stronger; intention alone just won't do it.

Cultivating [resilience](#) is much the same. Like [physical fitness](#), resilience is not a single quality but rather many ingredients that contribute differently to a range of strengths and situations. For instance, one may handle [relationship issues](#) rather well but be unable to cope with the stress of a traffic jam.

Some [building blocks](#) of resilience are factors that are largely beyond one's control, such as greater [income and education](#) and having [supportive environments](#). Some are things you can do in your [daily life](#), such as [exercise](#), [hobbies and activities](#), and [getting adequate sleep](#). Other facets might take more time to develop, such as nourishing [supportive relationships](#), building skills for [tolerating distress](#) and [regulating emotions](#), [meditation](#), incorporating [spirituality or religion](#) and practicing [less self-criticism](#) and more [self-compassion](#).

Resilience can be cultivated

Confusing connotations about resilience pervade not only the scientific

literature and mental health approaches but also popular culture. The idea that difficult experiences make someone resilient is incorrect, or at least incomplete.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I heard people claim that "children are resilient." However, one of the largest research investigations about difficult childhood experiences, the [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) study, conducted in the 1990s at Kaiser Permanente with over 17,000 adults, established that cumulative stressors experienced in childhood [impair both mental](#) and [physical health](#). It also found that [more stress predicts worse outcomes](#).

What actually helped people be more resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Studies show that the same building blocks mentioned above helped people navigate the pandemic with greater well-being. Many of these same building blocks also improve people's outcomes following other [stressful experiences](#), such as [unemployment](#), [cancer](#), [divorce](#) and exposure to [violence](#).

All of this says that resilience can flourish by incorporating specific behaviors and creating healthy environments. People often assume it's optimal to remain relatively unaffected by stress—that is, to "get over it" quickly. In many cases, that might be the case. If you forget an important meeting, for example, a response of "Oh no! I need to apologize right away and reschedule" is probably healthier than punching a wall or concluding that you're a terrible person.

But what if a relationship ends? Is it always best to get over it quickly, or could a longer reflection and healing process lead to deeper learning and growth? What looks like resilience could instead be suppressing, numbing or hiding feelings. Those tendencies are [linked with worse](#)

[mental health](#).

This is why the concept of resilience is somewhat nuanced; some people who seem resilient are just covering up, or [coping in an unhealthy way](#)—such as using alcohol to cope with difficult feelings.

Sometimes painful feelings or experiences contribute to personal development. Post-traumatic growth [refers to the positive changes](#) that some people report after trauma, especially when they incorporate [some of the resilience "building blocks"](#) listed above. This includes better relationships, a greater appreciation of life and enhanced spiritual or philosophical understanding. Rather than expecting yourself to always feel good or to bounce back quickly, in some situations it may be wise to allow yourself to experience deeply challenging feelings and the personal growth that can ensue.

Resilience isn't always the answer

Resilience is more complex than being mentally tough or not letting things get to you. Pressuring yourself to appear OK when you're not—also known as [emotional perfection](#)—could make things worse and prevent you from seeking support. Sometimes, changing stressful environments, such as a job or living situation, rather than just adapting to them [is a healthier choice](#).

This is why resilience can be a loaded term. Although coping with challenges has its place, for [trauma survivors](#), people [who have experienced racism](#) or [homophobia](#), or those living in regions especially [affected by climate change](#), and [many others](#), resilience falls flat. The word comes across as tacitly accepting the status quo rather than demanding accountability from those who caused harm or working to reduce the sources of stress.

Overemphasizing resilience can reinforce racial injustice by suggesting that people who are subjected to it are resilient enough to handle it. Having to wear a [mask of resilience](#) or [put on a smile](#) can add to the burden of racism, making resilience exhausting. Having to continually adapt to microaggressions and other forms of racism takes a mental and physical toll, such that resilience to racism comes at a cost.

A one-sized-fits-all approach to resilience doesn't work for every person and problem. But most of us can benefit from nourishing some of the building blocks of resilience, such as cultivating supportive relationships, physical exercise and self-compassion.

Becoming more resilient is a process. We can benefit from working on the building blocks of our own individual resilience, and from initiatives in schools, workplaces and other environments that [promote resilience more broadly](#).

The number of factors affecting resilience may seem daunting. The upside is that you can choose from many effective ways of building resilience to determine the most suitable approach for you.

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