



Go Resilient

by MARIE WALL

In considering personal resiliency there are two factors that stand out – the necessity to bounce back in constantly changing times and whether it can be learned. The focus of our Wellness articles this year is “Go Healthy”, the Newfoundland and Labrador health initiative. On first glance this could be construed as a physical health campaign, but just as important is mental health. All components of health are intertwined – physical impacting mental health and vice versa. In this article we will consider several components of resiliency, its foundation for mental health, its need in coping with work and home life, its requirement when embarking on a healthy lifestyle in general and the skills that will support you in becoming more resilient.

Whether it is personal or professional change, external pressures or a setback in your life, being resilient is an advantage. According to the American Psychological Association (2004), “Resilience is an interactive product of beliefs, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and perhaps physiology that help people fare better during adversity and recover more quickly following it.” The advantage of rebounding after a difficult situation is sustained health and energy. Mental health is more than the absence of illness; it is not something that just occurs or not. Mental health can be likened to physical fitness. You can improve your fitness by considering what mental shape you want to be in and then take steps towards that state. Initially you may have general notions of what you want and require specific information to help you obtain your goal. You can improve your mental health. While you may not know exactly what steps are required, a general desire to have a more rewarding life is the first big step.

You may know someone you think is resilient and you may admirably think this is a natural quality, but if that is the case, it is time to think again. While resilience is an innate tendency that exists in all human beings, for some it may need to be relearned because life circumstances may have dampened a person’s ability to recover from a difficult situation. We often see how children bounce back from unfortunate situations or adversity. The phrase “children are so resilient” is commonly heard. If children have this trait, adults do too. Whether it is overt or laying dormant, rekindling resilience will improve one’s mental outlook.

There are steps that can be taken to move towards feeling stronger. The first is to make a commitment to your mental health, then build the necessary skills to navigate obstacles, develop inner strengths and create a positive attitude. Each of these skills builds on the others. A positive attitude without personal confidence is not a recipe for resilience. Here you will be guided through each to assess where you are already strong and what areas need work.

The second step – learn the personal coping skills. Effective problem solving, decision making and time management skills enhance one’s confidence. When we learn them, we learn to trust ourself. A person who focuses on solving a problem is empowered to make changes rather than become helpless or disengaged. The solution may be personal or it could be a group solution; either way, you will enjoy better relationships with others and enjoy improved mental health. Indecisiveness can greatly impact how you feel about yourself. Exploring the options, both logically and emotionally, will give you a sense of what needs to be done and what you can live with. One way to make the options explicit is to write them so you can see them in front of you. Then weigh all the alternatives and make a decision. Once a decision is made you will often feel relief, then trust that if further decisions are required you will be able to make those too. Along with these skills, time management gives you confidence in yourself when dealing with things as they occur. Unforeseen events can be overwhelming. Having the confidence that you can manage will go a long way in reassuring yourself that things will be better in time. Skills are learned either through observation and imitation, as a child may, or by a concerted effort in adulthood. Either way, you are in the driver’s seat in acquiring the tools that will assist in coping.

A third component for resiliency is having a healthy self-image. We may be very competent professionally but personally doubt ourselves; thus, when events occur there will be an uncertainty about one’s ability to manage. Self-image is comprised of three important inter-related characteristics. Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself, self-concept is how you see yourself and self-confidence is what you expect of yourself. Notice that each of these characteristics is self-focused, or

inner focused. Often people are taught to be external and other focused. Yet if you do not know yourself, your feelings and your expectations will make you uncertain about how to proceed. You can look at this as “selfish unselfish”, for in knowing and trusting yourself you will be much more capable in all situations. Take the time to really understand and trust your inner life. It is this type of self-awareness that sets a foundation for dealing with all types of situations.

Lastly, perception is essential to becoming resilient. Perception is how you view events that occur either regularly or occasionally. If you believe that life will go along smoothly without any undesired or unforeseen events, unanticipated incidents will take you off guard. As well, you will have to cope with the stress of feeling vulnerable and dealing with what needs your attention. By assuming events will occur and trusting that you can manage even the unforeseen, you will have more confidence in yourself and your ability to cope. Al Siebert, author of *The Resiliency Advantage*, differentiates between stress and strain; he says stress is an external pressure while strain is the internal effect. Stressors are fairly constant because external pressures challenge you frequently. How you manage the stressors will indicate your coping ability. Expecting that things will occur and trusting your ability to manage time are important factors in being resilient.

Resiliency is necessary in today’s changing environments both at home and at work. Becoming more resilient is a process and is required for better mental health. Take some time to consider in what ways you are resilient and in what ways you would like to become better equipped. If you have a difficult time imagining how to do this, think of a person you consider resilient and consider what qualities they possess and how you might learn them. In writing this article I consulted the book, *The Resiliency Advantage*, by Al Siebert, as referenced above. It is written as a tool to build resiliency and I have no hesitation in recommending it. Also, I suggest you may consider working with a counsellor to enhance your mental health capacity. If you want to discuss this further please call. We can recommend a counsellor and cost share the fees.

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