



21 things to help manage stress and build resilience

At the time of writing, the rate at which lockdown is being released is increasing. While this is a relief for some, others are experiencing increased stress. Although this may seem surprising, it relates in part to this being yet another 'change point', and change is often associated with stress. Read on for a number of ways in which stress can be managed, and resilience built.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to “demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in fast-paced, pressured...diverse environments; [to] display confidence, energy and stamina in meeting challenging goals...[drawing] on other areas of life to maintain a healthy and balanced perspective”¹

- Roden, M., et al. (2002)

“...resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, [as well as] their capacity to use these resources...in culturally meaningful ways.”²

- Ungar, M. (2010)

Some characteristics associated with resilience

According to Roden (adapted from Connor 1995), the basic attributes of resilient people are:

- **Positive** – self-assured, they possess a sense of security with the world around them
- **Focused** – they have a clear vision of what they want to achieve
- **Flexible** – they're psychologically pliable when faced with change or uncertainty
- **Organised** – they have developed structured approaches for managing ambiguity
- **Proactive** – they engage and move with change rather than defending against it
- **Energetic** – they display high levels of physical, emotional and intellectual energy.

Some of the behaviours associated with resilience

On the whole, resilient people tend to display a number of common behaviours and attitudes, all of which can be learned and practised throughout life. These include:

- A healthy and enjoyable life balance
- Effective pressure management techniques
- Self-responsibility and a sense of purpose in life
- Identification of personal values
- Prioritisation and time management
- Effective decision-making skills
- Flexible or learned optimism
- Continuous self-development.

21 things you can do today

1. Get enough sleep

The amount of sleep human beings need to function effectively varies from person to person, and also changes as we age. Between seven and eight hours of nightly sleep tends to be seen as the norm, although only you can tell if you are getting too little – or too much – sleep. The right amount of sleep has an undeniably positive impact on our energy, mood, concentration and motivation. If you are experiencing issues with your sleep, such as waking early without meaning to, or waking in the middle of the night with intrusive worries and thoughts, you might want to explore developing a personal bedtime routine which could include avoiding caffeine and alcohol before bed, installing blackout curtains in your bedroom, playing soothing music before you go to sleep, or speaking with your GP if your sleep problems are ongoing and chronic. Check out our guide to practising great sleep hygiene.

2. Exercise

We all know that exercise is good for us, but too often, we can't find the time (or the motivation!). Did you know that even 30 minutes of activity, five times a week can lift your mood and reduce anxiety? Regular activity can also decrease your risk of certain illnesses, including colon cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Walking to work instead of taking the bus or using the stairs instead of the lift are easy steps you can take – so easy in fact that you might not even notice that you're changing your lifestyle. Have a look here to find out more about the benefits of staying active.

3. Eat well

We've all heard about the importance of eating our 'five a day', but busy schedules can make this a challenge. Your body needs the right vitamins and minerals to work properly, and ward off some illnesses, so it's worth planning your meals in advance to ensure that you're giving your body everything it needs to work optimally. Avoiding sugar highs can also help. Instead of eating cake or chocolate when you're feeling tired, choose fruit, nuts, cheese, seeds, lean protein or fish to sustain you through busy days. These foods release energy more slowly and consistently, allowing you to avoid cyclical peaks and troughs. You'll feel more mentally positive too.

4. Breathe

When we become stressed or anxious, we tend to breathe more erratically and quickly which in turns makes us feel more stressed. Find a comfortable position and breathe deeply, exhaling slowly through your nose while silently counting to five. Repeat five to ten times and notice how much calmer and in control you feel. It can be hard to find the time to do this in the middle of a particularly stressful day, but it takes just a few moments and can help you to feel more focused and sure of what steps you need to take to get through the crisis. You might also find our article on breathing for relaxation helpful.

5. Hydrate

Those recommended eight glasses of water a day really do help to improve your concentration and motivation. Both your physical and mental performance are enhanced when you ensure that you remain hydrated although steer clear of too much coffee which dehydrates the body. Rely instead on herbal teas or water with lemon if you don't like drinking plain water. Remember that fruits and vegetables are water-dense so those count too.

6. Take time out

Even 15 minutes of 'me time' a day brings positive benefits. Try getting out of bed slightly earlier than usual and use this new-found time for yourself. Having time to read the newspaper without interruption can feel like a real indulgence! If you're not a morning person, make sure that you have some time to yourself at lunch or after work. Going for a short walk, reading your favourite magazine, or planning a fun activity for the weekend can have a positive effect on both mood and outlook.

7. Laugh!

The more we laugh, the better we feel. When we're enjoying a joke with someone else we appear more approachable which promotes closeness and connection with others. Laughter also boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure, and makes us look (and feel!) younger – not to mention that laughing also releases endorphins, nature's pain and stress relievers. Best of all, laughter is contagious. Although it can be difficult to laugh when we're feeling stressed or angry, laughter brings a host of immediate benefits both mentally and physically. Consider the fact that laughing requires help from at least 15 facial muscles, keeping them supple and the skin glowing. Even the mere expectation of something funny is good for our health...the anticipation of a belly laugh appears to be enough to lift our spirits and boost the immune system with effects lasting for up to 24 hours. When you're feeling stressed, watch a comedy, read a funny book or speak to a friend who is known for their sense of humour. You'll feel much better for it.

8. Think positively

Negative thought patterns wear us down and encourage our brain to continue thinking negatively. Turning negative thoughts into positive actions will make you feel more in control and able to manage the challenges that life brings. When you notice yourself slipping into a negative thought pattern ("I can't do this", "I'm not good enough", "Everything is terrible"), identify one thing that you can do in that very moment to make yourself feel better. Even forcing yourself to say something positive out loud will have a significant impact on your outlook ("Things will get better", "I've been through this before, and I can do it again", "At least it's Friday!").

Avoid wasting your precious time and energy on thinking about what might go wrong and concentrate only on what's going well. Once you've done that, it's easier to address the areas that need more work without feeling overwhelmed. Optimism is a skill that you can learn, and like any skill, the more you practice, the better at it you become. And remember – a little unhappiness here and there forces us to work through problems and think about what gives us happiness encouraging us to take new directions that may change our lives. And, if you're dealing with a negative person, these tips might help you to step back and stay positive.

9. Get organised

Start slowly and don't try to organise everything at once. Perhaps there are some bank statements you've been meaning to look at for the past few months, or you've been avoiding making an appointment with the dentist. Just one task a day can bring a sense of calm to an otherwise overwhelming to-do list. Be realistic about what your priorities really are. Try separating tasks into those which you 'absolutely must do' and those that can be 'done next month'. You might even find that you can delegate certain things to other people. Good time management can be learned and practised – it's a skill like anything else.

10. Ask for (and accept) support

Asking for help can be difficult but it's one of the building blocks of resilience. Speaking with a trusted friend or family member when you're feeling overwhelmed by personal issues can really help and they may even offer you another point of view which you hadn't considered. It's the same at work: how often do you ask a colleague or manager for support when you're feeling overloaded? Look at it this way, if your child is having a problem at school, do you ask for support from their teachers, or do you try and sort the issue out on your own? Asking for help when you need it is a real strength – not a weakness. If asking for support, advice or guidance is new for you, start with something small. You could ask your partner to do the grocery shopping once a fortnight or you could arrange for a friend to look after your children once a month while you take time out for yourself. Once you get the hang of it, asking for help becomes a lot less daunting – especially when you reciprocate.

11. Volunteer

Volunteering boosts confidence, helps us to develop new skills, opens up new social and professional networks, and lifts our mood. Giving our time and support to others can also help us to put things in our own lives into perspective. Many charities are flexible in the time commitment they require from volunteers, and there is always a role to suit everyone's skills, schedule, and

interests. It can be a good idea to try out volunteering even once a month for a local charity before you commit so that you can decide if it's the right thing for you. You could start by making a list of charities you've always been interested in and contact each one to get a better idea of how you can use your own skills and expertise to make a real difference. Helping others is a key part of being human and brings untold benefits both emotionally and physically. Visit Time Bank or Do-It to find volunteering opportunities near you.

12. Get creative

We're all creative – even if we don't think we are. And while it might have been some time since you last picked up a paintbrush or wrote a story, it's never too late to explore and develop your artistic talents. Spending time creating something focuses the brain in much the same way as meditation does, bringing calm and perspective. Research also suggests that creativity increases neural activity in the brain promoting mental agility and improved memory. Your local college will offer affordable short courses in the evenings or weekends, and you can also visit any number of art galleries or museums for free talks on the kinds of things that interest you. And creativity isn't just about paper and paints. Doing a crossword, gardening, cooking, listening to music, or reading a book all bring health benefits, including lowered blood pressure and the reduction of stress hormones such as cortisol.

13. Be a kid again

You need only look at a child to know that human beings like to play. Throughout our lives, playing helps us to thrive – both emotionally and physically – by connecting us to others. Play is a source of relaxation as well as a source of stimulation for the brain and body. When we're at play, we're more inventive, alert, happy, flexible and resilient. If you've ever spent time with a child, you'll know how readily they laugh and delight in play; their imaginations run riot and they seem to completely forget their day-to-day worries. Adults benefit from play too, although some people might feel that they'd rather not take time out of a hectic schedule to engage in 'frivolous' activities. Playing is not frivolity – it's essential to both mental and physical wellbeing. Whether it's a sport or playing a computer game, window shopping or visiting an amusement arcade, decorating a cake or building something, taking time out to enjoy playful activities with friends or family has a positive effect on mood, outlook and energy levels.

14. Take time to recover

Just as you need time to recover from a physical illness or injury, so too should you ensure that you take time to recover after a period of stress. Arrange a check-up if you have not seen your GP within the last year and be sure to take any annual leave entitlement owing to you. Keep your life simple during this time of recovery; say "no" to requests from family or friends if you feel that you don't have the reserves available. Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake and try to eat as healthily as you can. Ensure that you get enough sleep and make time to see the people you care about. Recovery is key after a period of stress and allowing yourself this time will ensure that you can go on to face future challenges with a renewed sense of purpose.

15. Accept change

Managing change effectively is a key skill among resilient people. While we can't always plan for change, we can keep an open mind about what's around the corner. Life is a moveable feast for resilient people, and change is seen as a natural part of living. Make a conscious effort to stay flexible – even when change isn't occurring. Say "yes" to an invitation you wouldn't normally accept or change a routine you've become used to. The more you acquaint yourself with change in your daily life, the better you will manage when difficult challenges demand flexibility and a positive outlook. Avoiding change is normal for many of us, but you can learn to accept change and even use it to positive advantage.

16. Chew gum!

According to a study which involved over 2,250 people in employment, those who chew gum report less stress than their gum-free colleagues. The results showed that chewing gum was associated with lower levels of perceived stress (both at work and home). In fact, gum chewers were less likely to experience depression, or to have seen their doctor for high blood pressure or

high cholesterol. Chewing gum is also associated with lower levels of alcohol consumption. These results suggest that chewing gum may be a simple way of preventing stress and the negative health outcomes that are often associated with it which is in part due to the fact that gum chewing stimulates the vagus nerve which helps to induce relaxation.

17. Enjoy a cuppa

The British have the right idea when they brew a pot of tea in stressful times. It turns out that black tea is rich in stress-busting antioxidants, including polyphenols, flavonoids and amino acids. There's also some compelling evidence that green tea can help lower harmful LDL cholesterol. If you're sensitive to caffeine, there are a range of decaffeinated teas available on the market. The added bonus of having a cup of tea is the ritual involved with its preparation and the chance to sit down and enjoy it.

18. Spend time with a pet

Whether you live with a dog, a cat, or another furry friend, stress reduction is one of the great benefits of having an animal companion. In one study, watching just ten minutes of footage of animals playing was enough to lower volunteers' heart rates and blood pressure when they were feeling stressed. Other research has linked pet ownership with significantly lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels. If you don't have an animal, spend time with a friend's pet and see what a difference it makes, or go to the park and watch the dogs at play.

19. Switch off and admire the view

Next time you feel overwhelmed, turn off your computer screen and look out the window instead. One large-scale study found that employees sitting at window seats recover more quickly from performing a series of stressful tasks than those who face a blank wall or even a high-definition plasma screen displaying a nature scene. The more time they spent gazing at the view outside, the more quickly their heart rates dropped back to normal after the period of high stress. Don't worry however if you don't have a window by your desk – most of us don't! When you feel overwhelmed, take just ten minutes to enjoy the view outside and you'll experience the same benefits.

20. Surround yourself with positive people

Having someone in your immediate social circle who thinks positively increases your own happiness by 15%. It seems that happy people have the power to spread their feel-good vibes far and wide in the same way that a ripple spreads across a pond. Not only do positive friends make a difference to our wellbeing, but so do colleagues and acquaintances with a good sense of humour and sense of fun. Hanging out with positive, upbeat and cheerful people can have far-reaching benefits for both your mental and physical health.

21. Keep a 'good day' journal

Simply writing down what you're thankful for makes you healthier, happier and more optimistic. Being thankful for the good things that happen to us reminds us that we have a lot to look forward to. You could start by asking yourself what two things you're thankful for today...a warm, sunny day, the recognition of your partner for something you've done, a good laugh with a friend, or being helped unexpectedly by a stranger. Keeping a journal doesn't have to be time-consuming and you might only want to do it when things get tough. Whatever approach you take, recognising the good makes the difficult easier to deal with.

Sources:

1 Roden, M. in Miller, D. M., Lipsege, M., Litchfield, P. (2002) Work and Mental Health, Glasgow, Royal College of Psychiatrists

2 Ungar, M., Researching Resilience (2009), Toronto, University of Toronto Press

<https://www.myrtwellbeing.org.uk/managing-stress/21-things-to-help-manage-stress-and-build-resilience/385.article>