

How to Build Resilience in Midlife



By Tara Parker-Pope

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Much of the scientific research on resilience — our ability to bounce back from adversity — has focused on how to build resilience in children. But what about the grown-ups?

While resilience is an essential skill for healthy childhood development, science shows that adults also can take steps to boost resilience in middle age, which is often the time we need it most. Midlife can bring all kinds of stressors, including divorce, the death of a parent, career setbacks and retirement worries, yet many of us don't build the coping skills we need to meet these challenges.

The good news is that some of the qualities of middle age — a better ability to regulate emotions, perspective gained from life experiences and concern for future generations — may give older people an advantage over the young when it comes to developing resilience, said Adam Grant, a management and psychology professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

“There is a naturally learnable set of behaviors that contribute to resilience,” said Dr. Grant, who, with Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, wrote the book [“Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy.”](#) “Those are the behaviors that we gravitate to more and more as we age.”

Scientists who study stress and resilience say it's important to think of resilience as an emotional muscle that can be strengthened at any time. While it's useful to build up

resilience before a big or small crisis hits, there still are active steps you can take during and after a crisis to speed your emotional recovery.

Last year Dr. Dennis Charney, a resilience researcher and dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, was leaving a deli when he was shot by a disgruntled former employee. Dr. Charney spent five days in intensive care and faced a challenging recovery.

“After 25 years of studying resilience, I had to be resilient myself,” said Dr. Charney, co-author of the book “Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges.” “It’s good to be prepared for it, but it’s not too late once you’ve been traumatized to build the capability to move forward in a resilient way.”

Here are some of the ways you can build your resilience in middle age.

- **Practice Optimism.** Optimism is part genetic, part learned. So, if you were born into a family of Eeyores, you can still find your inner Tigger. Optimism does not mean ignoring the reality of a dire situation. After a job loss, for instance, many people may feel defeated and think, “I’ll never recover from this.” An optimist would acknowledge the challenge in a more hopeful way, saying, “This is going to be difficult, but it’s a chance to rethink my life goals and find work that truly makes me happy.”

While it sounds trivial, thinking positive thoughts and surrounding yourself with positive people really does help. Dr. Steven Southwick, a psychiatry professor at Yale Medical School and Dr. Charney’s co-author, notes that optimism, like pessimism, can be infectious. His advice: “Hang out with optimistic people.”

Rewrite Your Story. When Dr. Charney was recovering from the shooting, he knew that his life was forever changed, but he reframed the situation, focusing on the opportunity the setback presented. “Once you are a trauma victim it stays with you,” he said. “But I knew I could be a role model. I have thousands of students watching my recovery. This gives me a chance to utilize what I’ve learned.”

Study after study has shown that we can benefit from reframing the personal narrative that shapes our view of the world and ourselves. In expressive writing studies, college students taught to reframe their college struggles as a growth opportunity got better grades and were less likely to drop out. [A Harvard study](#) found that people who viewed stress as a way to fuel better performance did better on tests and managed their stress better physiologically than those taught to ignore stress.

“It’s about learning to recognize the explanatory story you tend to use in your life,” Dr. Southwick said. “Observe what you are saying to yourself and question it. It’s not easy. It takes practice.”

- **Don’t Personalize It.** We have a tendency to blame ourselves for life’s setbacks and to ruminate about what we should have done differently. In the moment, a

difficult situation feels as if it will never end. To bolster your resilience, remind yourself that even if you made a mistake, a number of factors most likely contributed to the problem and shift your focus to the next steps you should take.

“Telling yourself that a situation is not personal, pervasive or permanent can be extremely useful,” Dr. Grant said. “There is almost no failure that is totally personal.”

- **Remember Your Comebacks.** When times are tough, we often remind ourselves that other people — like war refugees or a friend with cancer — have it worse. While that may be true, you will get a bigger resilience boost by reminding yourself of the challenges *you* personally have overcome.

“It’s easier to relate to your former self than someone in another country,” said Dr. Grant. “Look back and say, ‘I’ve gone through something worse in the past. This is not the most horrible thing I have ever faced or will ever face. I know I can deal with it.’”

Sallie Krawcheck, a former Wall Street executive, said that after a very public firing, she reminded herself how fortunate she still was to have a healthy family and a financial cushion. While she has never studied resilience, she believes early challenges — like being bullied in middle school (“It was brutal,” she said) and going through a painful divorce — helped her bounce back in her career as well. “I just believe in comebacks,” said Ms. Krawcheck, who recently founded Ellevest, an online investment platform for women. “I see these setbacks as part of a journey and not a career-ending failure. There was nothing they could do to me on Wall Street that was as bad as seventh grade.”

- **Support Others.** Resilience studies show that people are more resilient when they have strong support networks of friends and family to help them cope with a crisis. But you can get an even bigger resilience boost by *giving* support.

[In a 2017 study of psychological resilience](#) among American military veterans, higher levels of gratitude, altruism and a sense of purpose predicted resiliency.

“Any way you can reach out and help other people is a way of moving outside of yourself, and this is an important way to enhance your own strength,” said Dr. Southwick. “Part of resilience is taking responsibility for your life, and for creating a life that you consider meaningful and purposeful. It doesn’t have to be a big mission — it could be your family. As long as what you’re involved in has meaning to you, that can push you through all sorts of adversity.”

- **Take Stress Breaks.** Times of manageable stress present an opportunity to build your resilience. “You have to change the way you look at stress,” said Jack Groppe, co-founder of the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute, which recently began offering a course on resilience. “You have to invite stress into your life. A human being needs stress; the body and the mind want stress.”

The key, Dr. Groppe said, is to recognize that you will never eliminate stress from your life. Instead create regular opportunities for the body to recover from stress — just as you would rest your muscles between weightlifting repetitions. Taking a walk break, spending five minutes to meditate, or having lunch with a good friend are ways to give your mind and body a break from stress.

“Stress is the stimulus for growth, and recovery is when the growth occurs,” said Dr. Groppe. “That’s how we build the resilience muscle.”

■ **Go Out of Your Comfort Zone.** Resilience doesn’t just come from negative experience. You can build your resilience by putting yourself in challenging situations. Dr. Groppe is planning to climb Mount Kilimanjaro with his son. Take an adventure vacation. Run a triathlon. Share your secret poetry skills with strangers at a poetry slam.

“There is a biology to this,” said Dr. Charney. “Your stress hormone systems will become less responsive to stress so you can handle stress better. Live your life in a way that you get the skills that enable you to handle stress.”

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