

Adversity is a given and strikes everyone from time to time; it's how you handle it that really counts. Unfortunately we are not taught the skills needed to bounce back from adversity in school. But the good news is that it's never too late to learn resilience. Using a mixture of science, psychology and mindfulness practices, **Linda Graham** teaches you how to cope with the challenges that your life throws at you, elegantly

Be **super resilient** this year

LEARN HOW TO **EMERGE STRONGER**
FROM ANY CRISIS

"I am no longer afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship."

—Louisa May Alcott

I WAS WALKING FROM MY parked car to my office one morning, deep in a worrisome thought and not paying enough attention to where I was walking. Suddenly, I mindlessly stepped into a sidewalk of freshly laid wet cement—up to my ankles.

And the inner reactions just started cascading one after the other: "How careless! Look what you've done. You'll be late to work; You'll probably lose your first client; You'll have less income today." I

was just about to fall into an all too familiar rabbit hole of berating myself for always being so stupid when another inner voice piped up: "Wait a minute! So I was pre-occupied! I'm sick and tired of winding up feeling lousy about myself when I was just unconscious for a moment. For once I'd like to just deal with something and not make it all about me being stupid."

I stood there in the cement, noticing all these

Resilience is the capacity to cope with the disappointments, difficulties, and disasters in life with flexibility, bouncing back from life's setbacks with skill and adaptability, even grace



different reactions rushing through me, and realised I did have a choice about how I was going to handle this. I picked up my feet and stepped onto dry land as construction workers headed over to help me. As I picked my shoes out of the cement, I tried a little bit of compassion for myself. “Shit happens. I’m probably not the only person on the planet who made a mistake today because they weren’t paying attention. And this probably isn’t the only mistake I’m going to make today. Sure, I’m a little embarrassed in front of these guys, but that doesn’t mean anything more about me except that I just wasn’t paying attention.”

I took a couple of deep breaths, gave myself a quick little hug, and walked over to a faucet conveniently sticking out of a nearby apartment building to wash off my shoes and feet. As I began to have some hope that I might even save my shoes [I did!], I noticed also some pride emerging that I was coping—with the outer event and with my inner reactions to it—as well as I was.

By the time one of the construction workers gave me some paper towels to dry my shoes and feet, it dawned on me: “Yes, shit happens. Life is happening this way to me in this moment. But shift happens, too.” I could open to the lesson of the moment: choosing to shift my perspective had allowed me to cope resiliently right there, right then. The experience also taught me, right there, right then, that shifting perspectives and responding resiliently is possible in any moment, any moment at all.

The capacity to cope

It’s the capacity to shift gears, to move from automatic reactivity to more flexible responsiveness, that is the hallmark of resilience.

Resilience is the capacity to cope with the disappointments, difficulties, and disasters in life with flexibility, bouncing back from life’s setbacks with skill and adaptability, even grace. We are all called upon, every day, to cope with disruptive, unwanted changes in our lives—losing our wallet and car keys, discovering mould in the bathroom, leaving our laptop on the plane, dealing with the washing machine going on the fritz or the car needing a new transmission.

Occasionally, we have to respond with grace under pressure to greater troubles and tragedies: infertility or infidelity, a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, losing a job, placing an aging parent in a nursing home—things we never asked for, things we deeply,

deeply do not want. Resilience is what allows us to cope with the pain and suffering inherent in the human condition by staying open to our experience and skilfully shifting gears.

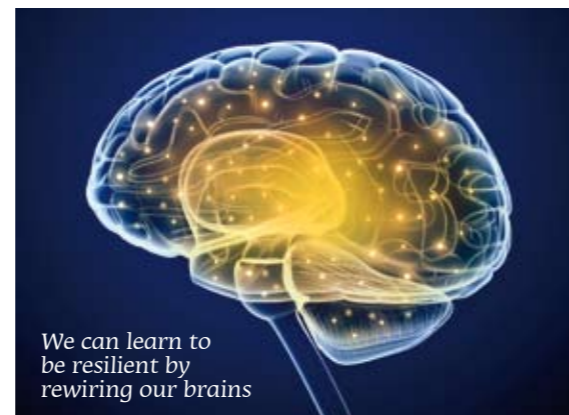
Capacities of resilience are innate in the brain, hard-wired in by evolution. Some are unconscious and automatic—we don’t have to ‘learn’ the survival responses of fight-flight-freeze in the lower brain. They happen automatically without any need for conscious choice or processing. Other coping strategies are learned from interactions with other people, especially early on in life. We learn to withdraw in the face of criticism; we learn to walk out the door in tight-lipped anger when we feel insulted. These strategies can also operate unconsciously; 80 per cent of the time they do. But they can be brought to conscious awareness and rewired to be more resilient.

Learning to be resilient

Because of the brain’s neuroplasticity—its lifelong capacity to grow new neurons and create new neural structure—we can also learn new more resilient coping strategies and rewire old, less adaptive ones, when we know how.

Modern brain science is illuminating how the brain ‘learns’ its patterns of response to life events in the first place so that we can learn to change them now. Any experience, any experience at all, positive or negative, causes neurons in the brain to fire. Repeated experiences will cause repeated neural firings. “Neurons that fire together, wire together,” strengthening the connections between them, and creating new neural pathways, even new neural circuitry.

We’re learning how we can rewire our previously learned responses [“How stupid!”] to more flexible resilient responses [“I’m not the only person on



We can learn to be resilient by rewiring our brains

the planet today... ”]. This rewiring allows us to shift from the reactivity of the lower brain [very fast, but its range of options very limited] to the responsiveness of the higher brain [s-l-o-w, but very comprehensive in its range of options]. This shift in brain functioning allows us to shift our state of mind from a ‘poor me’ victim stance to an empowered ‘I’ and sense of agency, thus shifting our behaviours to be more and more resilient.

Skills needed to bounce back from adversity can be learned; resilience can be strengthened in the moment, over time, eventually becoming a way of being.

It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptive to change.

— Charles Darwin

I’ve organised the experiential tools to rewire the brain to become more resilient into four intelligences below; all of these tools create new experiences for your brain which, when repeated over time, help the brain learn how to shift gears and bounce back.

Somatic intelligence

When the body-brain senses danger or life threat, it releases the stress hormone cortisol to mobilise us into action. We respond to an external stressor with an internal stress response. Cortisol works; we move. But it can also hijack the functioning of the pre-frontal cortex—the brain’s centre of executive functioning, which I call the CEO of resilience. We literally can’t think straight. In the long term, cortisol also damages brain cells in the hippocampus, the brain structure we use for learning and the installation of long-term memory. Cortisol also severely impacts the immune system, compromising our physical health.

The fastest way to down-regulate the stress response and reduce the flow of cortisol is through touch, because warm, safe touch activates the release of oxytocin, the hormone of safety and trust. Oxytocin is the brain’s direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. It returns our body-brain to a state of physiological equilibrium and brings the functioning of the pre-frontal cortex back online.



Rewiring our brain allows us to shift from reacting to responding

Hand on the heart

One technique, powerful enough to calm down a panic attack in less than a minute, is called Hand on the Heart. When you notice distress or discomfort:

1. Place your own hand on your own heart centre [the warm touch begins to activate the release of oxytocin]
2. Breathe deeply [activating the parasympathetic or calming branch of the nervous system]
3. Breathe a sense of peace or ease or goodness into your heart centre [restoring the heart’s coherent heart rate variability]
4. Then take a moment to remember an instance when you felt safe, loved and cherished by someone. This someone could be a partner or close friend; it could be a spiritual figure or beloved teacher; it could even be a pet.



Putting your hand on your heart releases oxytocin and calms you down in less than a minute

Scientists have found that being held by someone we feel safe with, even being physically near someone we feel safe with, remembering someone we feel safe with, even imagining being with someone we feel safe with, is enough to release the oxytocin that will restore our physiological equilibrium, bringing us back into a state of calm and trust from which it is possible to be resilient.

My client Andy reported during one session that just two days earlier his wife Lisa was in a high state of agitation while running late getting their recalcitrant four-year-old son to pre-school. He was afraid that saying anything would make matters worse, so he simply stood in the doorway where Lisa could see him with his hand on his heart. Lisa caught herself, stopped, met his gaze, and put her hand on her heart, too. Andy took one step toward Lisa; Lisa took three steps toward him. They melted into a 20-second, full-body, 'tend and befriend' oxytocin-releasing hug, and then calmly got their son to school—on time—without further upset.

We can also use touch in the form of hugs, head rubs or foot rubs, and massaging the back of the neck. [The brainstem, accessed at the top of the spine

near the base of the skull, is loaded with oxytocin receptors.] We can "keep calm and carry on."

Using your body posture

Another tool of somatic intelligence is to use the posture of the body to shift our emotional state. You can experiment by placing a pencil between your nose and your upper lip; the posture of 'frowning' will actually cause you to feel a little disgruntled. If you hold the pencil between your teeth, the forced 'smile' can shift your mood to one of more joy or happiness.

My client David used his entire body to shift his state. He showed me the body posture for feeling depressed, then he shifted his entire body into a more expansive, upreaching stance. He went back to the first posture, then returned to the second more open stance, then allowed his body to return to a posture somewhere in the middle. When I asked him what he noticed about the various postures, he said he had thought the opposite of depression would be joy or happiness. To his surprise, it was reverence. David's experience of reverence helped him be more flexible and resilient in coping with his down moods. From this bodily experience of moving through

depression to reverence, he also knew that he could choose to rewire his emotional state.

You can apply this technique of using the body to shift your emotions through a technique called Power Posing. By simply standing tall, feet planted firmly on the ground, chest and head lifted up, perhaps arms raised straight up over your head [very similar to the mountain pose of yoga] you can generate a feeling of strength and stability in your body that helps you feel empowered before you walk into a business meeting or a confrontation with a boss or angry client.

Emotional intelligence

Our emotions are body-based signals to take action. Anger is a signal to protest an injustice or betrayal; fear is a signal to move away from danger or toxicity; sadness is a signal to pull in comfort and support; joy is a signal to connect with others in celebration.

The challenge with managing and expressing our emotions is the built-in negativity bias of the brain. We are evolutionarily hard-wired to notice and remember negative and intense experiences far more readily than positive and subtle ones. You can experience 10 positive interactions with people in the course of a day, but you'll remember the one negative experience of someone frowning at you over the dinner table. This negative bias is how we survive, as a species and as individuals, but this bias can lead to avoidance or withdrawal from experience rather than openness, curiosity, engagement with life events and other people.

Neuroscientists have discovered that concentrating on positive emotions—kindness, compassion, generosity, gratitude, awe, delight, love—triggers what they call a 'left shift' in the brain, meaning more neural activity in the left hemisphere of the brain than in the right. For reasons also based in evolution, the left hemisphere has more of an approach stance toward experience. When we concentrate our attention on positive emotions, we antidote the negativity bias of the brain and stay more open to learning and growth.

Focussing our attention on positive experiences is not meant to bypass uncomfortable feelings, not at all. But, focussing our attention on positive experiences does shift our perspective from the contraction and restriction of our survival responses to perceiving more options, more possibilities.

Over the last 20 years, researchers in the positive psychology movement have documented substantial

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benefits to the daily practice of positive emotions over time: less anxiety, less depression, less loneliness, more friendships, more collaboration with others, better sleep and better health, as well as more optimism, more creativity and more resilience. It's quite motivating to know that resilience is a direct cause-and-effect outcome of focussing our attention on positive emotions.

Melissa's shift

My friend Melissa and I have walked the ridge trail near our homes almost every Tuesday for the last eight years. One Tuesday last fall, about five minutes into the walk, Melissa tripped and fell onto the trail. Having broken her left arm just six months previously [which required two surgeries and still implanted-pins], and having heard a 'crack!' as she fell, she was understandably cautious and concerned. She rolled onto her back and began testing movement in her knees and ankles, felt the soreness in her left foot, and began to think her way through—going to the emergency room, cancelling clients, cancelling plans for the week.

About two minutes into her worries, Melissa suddenly said, "I need to shift my attitude!" She began doing a gratitude practice; she began noticing the amazing patterns in the clouds from her unusual vantage point lying on the trail. I lay down on the trail, too, and we snuggled together in the early morning chill, holding hands, both of us beginning to laugh at the predicament but also rejoicing in the friendship that was going to get us through the predicament.

It's quite motivating to know that resilience is a direct cause-and-effect outcome of focussing our attention on positive emotions



On the way back to my car I commented on how resilient Melissa was, how quickly she had come to the realisation that she needed to—and could—shift her attitude. Melissa acknowledged she knew she had a choice and she made the choice to come out of worry and into an optimistic view again. It turned out that Melissa had indeed broken a bone in her ankle; she would be wearing her walking boot for about a month, but she would still be seeing clients and still going to her beloved opera on the weekend.

It's easy to begin a simple daily gratitude practice: jotting down in a journal or e-mailing a friend three things you're grateful for every day. Knowing that you're going to be writing or e-mailing experiences you are grateful for helps you notice them more as they happen during a day.

Taking in the good

Taking in the good is another a practice that allows you to install those experiences you're grateful for into your long-term memory:

1. Notice a positive experience in the moment, or remember one from the past
2. Feel the sense of gratitude for the experience in your body
3. Focus on that sense for 10-20-30 seconds, long enough for the brain to encode the experience in your long-term memory.

Because the brain rewires itself from repetition of experience, if you remember one experience six times a day [30 seconds six times is just three minutes of practice] you will have created a resource of support and resilience you can call upon forever after.

Relational intelligence

Researchers have found that the greatest de-railers of our resilience are the internal messages we carry around of “not good enough,” or “I’m a loser,” and the internalised experiences of inadequacy, failure, or shame. We all can be blocked in our resilience by the inner critic or inner judge. Brene Brown,

pioneering researcher on the impact of shame, says, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging. Shame erodes the part of ourselves that believes we are capable of change. We cannot change and grow when we are in shame, and we can't use shame to change ourselves or others.”

The cure for shame is acceptance, both self-acceptance of who we are, exactly as we are, and the acceptance of others when we can feel safe enough to be exactly who we are with them.

Richard's inner critic

My client Richard had set out driving to his best friend's engagement party in a pretty good mood. His job was satisfying: he was climbing the ladder as a regional division manager of a biotech company. His body was strong and healthy: he was one of the fastest swimmers in his master swim class. The tomatoes were ripening robustly in his garden. And he was making good time travelling, despite the crowded mountain highway. He was happy for his friend Toby, who was getting married to the woman he adored.

Suddenly, Richard felt a pang inside, as if someone had opened the door to a dark room. He could expect some teasing by a mutual friend at the party about his two failed marriages. Why couldn't he get it together? Richard began to slip into a cascade of misgivings and self-doubt. Should he have tried harder? Was there something wrong with him that caused two women to leave him? Would everyone at the party know he was a failure? The hope he harboured of meeting someone new at the party, having another chance, began to fade.

Even though Richard tried to switch the channel and think of something else, or even remember the good things about himself that he was recounting earlier, he began to sink into a black hole. His inner critic was relentless. Who was he kidding? He'd never be good enough to meet someone at the party today. In his fog, Richard didn't notice that the car in front of him had stopped abruptly. He 'woke up' too late to put the brakes on and rear-ended the car in front. No one was hurt, but he totalled his small car and seriously dented theirs.

Even though a friend quickly came and rescued him, and everyone at the party was understanding and concerned about the accident, Richard found it impossible at first to take in their love and acceptance. He was sunk in a swamp of shame.

Knowing that you're going to be writing or e-mailing experiences you are grateful for helps you notice them more as they happen during a day



Shame has been called the 'great disconnecter.' The best way to crawl out of the swamp of shame is to come into connection with another person who loves and accepts us exactly as we are, even if we sometimes have to conjure them up in our imagination, and then to build on that love to come into our own love and acceptance of ourselves exactly as we are.

Richard managed to find a few moments alone at the party with Toby and told him what had really caused the car accident. Toby had been Richard's friend since college, through all the dating, getting married, getting divorced, trying again, and 'failing' again. Toby knew Richard's deep-down goodness, his sincere intentions to be kind and loving, and his willingness to learn what was getting in the way of those intentions. Toby also knew Richard's tendency to collapse into a 'poor me' attitude rather than an empowered feeling of “I can do this.”

As they talked, Toby reminded Richard of all the trust, affection, and respect they had shared with each other over the years. Richard could begin to listen as Toby framed Richard's longing to be in a healthy relationship as itself a healthy sign. “Look man, after all you've gone through, you're still willing to take a risk again. I'm betting my money on you for sure; it will happen.”

At the end of the conversation, Toby suggested that Richard join a men's group that he knew about, which was focussed on connecting in healthy relationships. Because Richard could take in the sincerity of Toby's acceptance and affection for him, he could see the possibilities for healing and awakening in the suggestion. He was able to come out of his shame swamp and rejoin the party. Within a few weeks he had joined the men's group and began, in effect, hanging out with emotionally healthy brains. He also enrolled in several workshops on being authentic in intimate relationships, learning to focus



Self acceptance helps you to transcend feelings of shame



We conjure our own inner critics that are relentless in tearing us up

on being his true self and seeing the true selves of other people.

After six months in the men's group and those workshops, learning many skills of healthy relating and accepting himself as a good enough potential partner, Richard hit it off with Lucy, the sister of one of the guests at Toby's wedding. They have now been happily married for 11 years.

There is a natural and inviolable tendency in things to bloom into whatever they truly are in the core of their being. All we have to do is align ourselves with what wants to happen naturally and put in the effort that is our part in helping it happen.

— David Richo

Here are two tools of self-acceptance we can use to rewire our sense of self, in the moment of de-railing and over the long haul.

Self-compassion break

Evoking some kindness and care toward ourselves exactly at the moment we are experiencing stress, pain, or discomfort doesn't yet solve the problem; it simply shifts us into a brain state from which we can solve the problem.

1. Pause and notice the experience of the moment. [The awareness helps bring the functioning of the higher brain back online.]
2. "Ouch! This hurts! This is painful." [Acknowledging the experience of the experiencer primes the brain to be receptive to activating our own care-giving system.]
3. "Oh, sweetheart! I'm here. I care." [Activating the care-giving system releases oxytocin in the body-brain, returning us to a sense of safety and trust.]
4. Say gently, quietly to yourself:
May I feel safe.
May I be aware of this moment, exactly as it is.
May I accept myself, exactly as I am, in this moment.

May I be kind to myself in this moment.
May I give myself all the compassion I need.
These phrases of loving kindness and care help your body-brain return to a state of equilibrium and equanimity.

The positivity portfolio

When I taught this exercise at a workshop at a local public library, someone came up to me afterwards and said that when she was a teenager, there was one winter when times were hard and her mother told all the children there wasn't enough money for Christmas presents that year, so everyone was to give each other cards with appreciative comments on them. She said that when she read the card from her brother, that was the first time she ever knew that he loved her.

You can create quite a resource of appreciation for yourself, too:

1. Ask 10 friends to send you a card or an e-mail with one or two sentences of acknowledgement of what you mean to them or appreciation of who you are.
2. Assemble all the phrases onto one piece of paper.
3. Tape the paper to your bathroom mirror or your computer monitor or carry it with you in your purse or wallet.
4. Read the 10 items on the piece of paper three times a day for 30 days. [Repetition!]
5. You will rewire your sense of your self.

Reflective intelligence

Mindfulness helps us see clearly what's happening in the moment—and our reactions to what's happening in the moment—which allows us to disentangle ourselves from previous patterns of response, shift gears and make a different choice in the next moment.

1. Pause, come into a sense of being present in the present moment—this primes the brain to be receptive to the experience.
2. Notice—and name—the experience in the moment. Both noticing and naming activate the higher brain with its capacities to reflect rather than only react.
3. Step back from the experience, view it from a bird's eye perspective. Un-coupling what's happening from our sense of self; recovering a sense of agency and choice.

4. Look at the experience from different perspectives, different angles—activating the brain's capacity to shift gears.
5. Discern available options—creating a choice point in our behaviour.
6. Choose a wise course of action.

Between a stimulus and a response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

— Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, survivor of Auschwitz

Shirley's automatic reactions

My client Shirley told me this story about preparing her taxes last spring. She began early in the morning, and within thirty minutes got caught in an old mindset: "This is confusing; this is overwhelming; this isn't workable. I don't know what I'm doing; I never was good at numbers; I can't do this!"

Because Shirley had been practising a form of compassionate reflection for more than a year, she noticed her state of mind. That noticing broke the automatic pattern of her reactivity. She noticed her annoyance at her state of mind. She quickly realised that being caught in this state wasn't helpful. She also realised that she didn't have to stay caught in the old mindset now.

Shirley took a walk around the block to clear her mind, came back to her desk, and took another five minutes to create a different mindset for herself. Could she use preparing her taxes as an opportunity to practice? Shirley brought her mindful empathy to bear on the issue, noticing every moment that

Mindfulness helps us see clearly what's happening in the moment—and our reactions to what's happening in the moment





Turn your regrets into lessons
through contemplation

she stayed in her wise mind—open-minded and curious about how her mind was responding to the task of preparing her taxes. She noticed and named moments when she was learning something new—a changed rule about depreciation, a better way to categorise her expenses. She also noticed and named moments when her mind began to contract in the face of something she didn't know.

She did call her neighbour Tom, a retired accountant, for advice three times that afternoon, but she managed to finish her taxes by dinnertime. She also noticed her sense of pride in mastering the task that had threatened to overwhelm her that morning, enjoying the deepening trust in herself and her practice; she noticed her gratitude that she noticed

Mastering the art of resilience does much more than restore you to who you once thought you were. Rather, you emerge from the experience transformed into a truer expression of who you were really meant to be.

— Carol Orsborn

her initial patterns of response and took them as a cue to practice. The noticing and naming kept her prefrontal cortex functioning well and brought her out of confusion into clarity.

Finding the gift in the mistake

This practice of 'catch the moment; make a choice' allows us to turn a 'regrettable moment' into a 'teachable moment.' Then we can Find the Gift in the Mistake:

1. This is what happened
2. This is what I did
3. This has been the cost
4. This is what I learned
5. This is what I would do differently going forward.

Recovering and strengthening our capacities for resilience through these four intelligences allows us to more easily shift gears and bounce back from life's setbacks, both in the moment and over time. Eventually, resilience becomes an ongoing way of being.



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