

A black and white photograph of a sunset over a mountain range. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright lens flare that radiates across the sky. The mountains are silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun.

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 4,6 (6/2010)

The Neuroscience of Resilience

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I've been exploring the neuroscience of resilience lately, because I'm hungrily curious about both (A) how do people cope with unfathomably challenging circumstances and come out the other side with their spirits and integrity intact (when I get disoriented just trying to meet a friend for dinner at a new restaurant and have been known to cry when my computer crashes) and (B) what can brain science teach us about strengthening the capacities of resilience from the bottom-up – at the level of neurons firing in new patterns that promote flexibility in the face of change.

I thank Dan Siegel, M.D., founder of the discipline of interpersonal neurobiology (how the development of the brain is kindled, shaped, conditioned and matured by mindful empathic relationships) for his model of nine functions of the prefrontal cortex. I'm organizing this essay about resilience around those functions,

because the prefrontal cortex is far and away the single most integrative structure of the brain for supporting resilience; it is considered by some neuropsychologists to be an “evolutionary masterpiece.”

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) integrates information vertically, horizontally, and temporally:

- Vertically – linking bottom up information from body sensations and the limbic system (the emotional engine of brain) with top down processing involving memory (conscious and unconscious), attention, motivation, planning, judgment, and behavior.
- Horizontally – connecting the different modes of processing of the right and left hemispheres of the brain
- Temporally – integrating experiences from the past, present and future to create a coherent narrative of who we are and how our life makes

Greetings

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Rick Hanson, PhD edits the Bulletin, and this issue was designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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sense.

In Dr. Siegel's model, the PFC accomplishes this regulation in nine ways:

1. Regulating of the autonomic nervous system – staying calm and engaged
2. Quelling the fear response
3. Regulate emotions –resilience is not blocked by fear or shame
4. Attunement – the felt sense of another's experience, someone else "getting" ours
5. Empathy – You know what I know, and I know that you know

6. Response flexibility – pause, options, evaluate options, appropriate decision
7. Insight – self-awareness
8. Intuition – the "gut" feeling
9. Morality

These many modes of neural integration and regulation via the prefrontal cortex are the most influential neural substrate of resilience.

So here goes.

Regulating the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)

The ANS is the part of our nervous system that automatically, without any conscious processing, regulates heart rate, breathing, and digestive

processes. We don't have to be conscious to breathe or to have our heart pump blood or to digest our food, thank goodness. That's all below the radar.

We can become conscious of our breathing, as we do in meditation and yoga, when we breathe deeply to calm the body and the mind. We can become conscious of our heart center, which many visionary researchers see as a kind of auxiliary brain. There are brain cells (neurons) around the heart that are activated when we experience disappointment or grief or shame. There can be a literal feeling of heartache or heartbreak. When we breathe a sense of goodness and safety into the heart, the heart rate slows down. We can intuit what is going on in our gut, whether something feels OK to us or feel "off."

The ANS is central to resilience because it keeps us in a "window of tolerance."

The window of tolerance is a zone where our nervous system is relaxed, calm, alert, engaged. When we are in our window of tolerance, which we hope is most of the time, we feel centered and balanced. Everything is humming along in equilibrium. When we are in our window of tolerance, we can perceive-process-respond to life events with a kind of wise equanimity. We can cope. We can be resilient.

When something new, challenging or alarming comes up, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (SNS) is automatically activated and we unconsciously mobilize to meet the new situation, challenge or threat. When we are regulated by the social engagement system of our prefrontal cortex, we turn to people near us to help with regulation, or we turn to memories

of people, in whose presence we have felt loved, understood or supported, to keep us in the sense of everything is OK, everything is going to be OK. When we are safely connected with others – either

It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

Irish blessing, thanks to Mary Pipher

present physically or inside the mind – and are within our window of tolerance, we mobilize quickly, act skillfully, take care of business and return to normal. So it's our social engagement system, regulated via the PFC, that keeps us in our window of tolerance - mobilized without fear.

But if we are startled or frightened by circumstances that overwhelm our social engagement system – which may be already weakened and vulnerable from deficits of attachment and bonding, there aren't sufficient social engagement resources to handle the stress.

Then the SNS is activated to mobilize us but without enough regulation. We rev up out of the window of tolerance into alarm, agitation, anxiety, and panic rather than wise resilient action. When this happens, we need to consciously down-regulate the fear and agitation, re-connect with a safe other(s), and activate the calming parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) to return to the window of

tolerance where we can think calmly and respond skillfully. Where we can be resilient.

Conversely, if we are very calm and relaxed, and the soothing PNS is operating without fear, we can become blissfully immobilized as in meditation, sleep or the afterglow of making love. These are wonderful states. But if they are not balanced by enough activation of the SNS, and if there is not enough sense of social engagement to help us feel connected and safe, and if there is fear – then we can withdraw into an immobilization of lethargy, numbness, depression, dissociation: in other words, a state of too much PNS without enough connection and engagement. We need the prefrontal cortex to consciously mobilize the social engagement system, and to give a little more gas to the SNS rather than putting the brakes on the PNS. This allows us to engage and respond to the challenge of the moment with resilient coping, instead of a numbed out withdrawal.

(See Exercise #1 below for a very simple exercise to activate the social engagement system of the prefrontal cortex and stay in the window of tolerance.)



The neuroscience is: the amygdala in our mid-brain operates unconsciously 24/7 as our alarm center, and our most primitive emotional processing center. It constantly assesses for threat or danger, and when it perceives threat or danger, it activates the SNS

plus signals the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis to release stress hormones, including cortisol. This is the body-brain's response to stress, which mobilizes us to act, to move, to protect, to defend, to change the situation, to cope.

When we don't have enough social engagement to keep us regulated in the window of tolerance, SNS and HPA activation catapult us out of the window of tolerance into the stress response of fight-flight. Furthermore, if this activation bumps us into previously learned patterns of coping through passivity, submission, confusion, withdrawal, or

isolation, the body can drop precipitously into collapse-freeze, shutting down and immobilizing to be safe.

Either way, a wonderful antidote to the stress response of fight-flight-freeze and to disconnection, withdrawal and shutting down, is the regulation of the ANS through oxytocin.

Oxytocin is the naturally occurring neurotransmitter and hormone of safety and trust, of bonding and attachment. It is released through warmth, touch, movement. Common catalysts for

the release of oxytocin are orgasm and breastfeeding. Neuroscientists are discovering that any time we feel safe, warm, loved, and cherished, we release of small doses of oxytocin in the brain; even thinking about, imagining or remembering being loved and cherished is enough to release this oxytocin.

And oxytocin is the brain's direct and immediate antidote to cortisol, which down-regulates the flood of cortisol. Oxytocin from calm and connection antidotes fight-flight-freeze. Have you seen a child or a friend in the throes of an upset, and a gentle hug and a "there, there"

Words of Wisdom:

Resilience

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 Osborn

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

Charles Darwin

It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.

Marilyn Ferguson

Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.

Anais Nin

The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.

M. Scott Peck

and the child-person calms down and re-groups almost instantaneously? That's the regulating effect of oxytocin. We come back into the window of tolerance where life can be coped with again because our higher thinking brain can stay online. We can choose how to respond. The reaching out with a hug, a hand on the back, a hand on the heart, can release oxytocin. It also re-activates the social engagement system of the prefrontal cortex. This combination of oxytocin and re-engagement creates a felt sense in the body of safety and trust; of connection and belonging. This is a neurochemical transformation to calm us down and re-engage with a safe other. It is a neurochemical foundation of resilience, lifelong.

Quelling the Fear Response

Not only can the prefrontal cortex calm down the stress response and bring someone back into calm and connection through the release of oxytocin, the prefrontal cortex can also use the social engagement system to preemptively quell the fear response of the amygdala in the first place. Numerous research studies at U.C. Davis and the University of Wisconsin are now showing that, when someone is "primed" to feel safe, connected or loved before they experience a stressor, their body-brains have less reaction to the

stressor, and sometimes no reaction at all. Stressful events simply roll off them more readily, like water off a duck's back. This is a fundamental feature of resilience, to simply be less reactive to stressful events when they occur.

Neuroscientists now know the prefrontal cortex does this pre-empting by growing neuronal fibers down to the amygdala. These fibers carry the GABA (gamma amino butyric acid) neurotransmitter, which inhibits the amygdala. If you want to, you can buy GABA in health food stores as a stress reducer (use with caution, as with any nutraceutical product). You can also do exercise #2 in Exercises to Practice below.

Regulating Emotions

The third function of the prefrontal cortex is to regulate emotions. Emotions are waves of body sensations that signal us to "pay attention, this is important!" and that mobilize us to act. Every

emotion has signature physiological markers and adaptive action tendencies. If we're angry, we contract, tense up, and are ready to fight; anger mobilizes us to take action against injustice or a boundary violation. If we're afraid; we stop, go on alert, become hyper-vigilant, scan, and are ready to flee, to run. In sadness and grief, we feel waves



of emotions welling up. We fold in and become smaller, more childlike; the action tendency is to pull for comfort and support. If we're feeling ashamed, we feel an inner drop like the rug is pulled out; we collapse, withdraw, disconnect, hide to become invisible; anything to not draw attention.

All of these emotions trigger active protective responses; sometimes resilient, sometimes not. There are also emotions of delight, joy, interest, curiosity, and play; when we're activated and regulated. These emotions mobilize us to move toward or approach an event, experience, or person. Emotions of peacefulness and contentment allow us to remain quietly alert in our window of tolerance.

The prefrontal cortex is what allows us to consciously feel, recognize and hold the waves of emotions as they move through our body; and they do move through our body as long as we stay regulated (as long as we're not hijacked by the amygdala revving up or shutting us down).

We can feel hijacked by our emotions when we get into a state that we can't come back out of for a few moments, or hours, or days, or weeks, or

months. (People do get stuck in anxiety, rage, and depression for very long periods of time.) So the key to being resilient around emotions is to stay regulated, so the body sensations of the emotions can move through; even if that means becoming regulated by someone else, like a therapist or a friend. Once we are regulated, waves of emotion can move through, and we can let them move through.

One skillful way to hold and process an emotion is to allow the emotion; feel it fully and compassionately; and then skillfully allow a very positive pro-social emotion like gratitude, kindness, or compassion, to arise also; to allow the two emotions to be present at the same time. When the positive emotion is felt in the body strongly enough, the neural circuitry of the two emotions will begin to pair together, fire together and wire together. The positive emotion will literally re-wire the neural firing pattern of the negative emotion. (See Exercise #3 for a simple exercise to do this.)

The neuroscience behind this: a mechanism of neural deconsolidation/reconsolidation discovered in the last 10 years. When we remember an event, especially if we can evoke a body memory of the event, and bring that body memory to consciousness, we light up the synaptic connections that hold that memory in long-term storage, even implicit memory, outside of everyday awareness. The memory network is lit up, the neurons are firing. If we bring up a negative memory, and then bring up simultaneously a memory that contradicts or disconfirms the first memory, the two memories are now lit

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up together, firing at the same time. Neurons that fire together wire together; the memory networks and the synaptic connections deconsolidate for a fraction of a second, and then reconsolidate a fraction of a second later, changed. The neural networks of the two memories have begun connecting together. When the second, more positive or more wholesome memory is stronger than the first, more negative memory, the second memory trumps the first memory and changes it in a more positive direction. This change, researchers are discovering, can be immediate, and it can be permanent. The process of deconsolidation/reconsolidation is how trauma memories can resolve, or even dissolve, and no longer hijack us.

This process of deconsolidation/reconsolidation is very important for resilience, because once we experience this process happening even once, we know we can do it again and again. Just knowing that strengthens our capacities for resilience.

Attunement

Our prefrontal cortex first learns the first three functions - regulating the ANS, quelling the fear response, and regulating emotions – in large part by being in relationship with caregivers who can do that for us.

Consequently, the capacity of caregivers to regulate their own ANS, quell their own fear response and regulate their own emotions is a major factor in developing the regulatory capacities of the prefrontal cortex of the growing child – or de-railing them. The empathic attunement of a parent to the child's needs, moods, fears, and joys, internalizes in the child a felt sense of a safe haven in the parent,

and fosters an internal secure base within the child. When the child experiences fear, he or she runs to the parent for protection and comfort. We are neurobiologically hardwired that way. The drive to seek physical proximity to a caregiver in times of perceived threat and danger is more primary than the drive for food, and operates lifelong. When the parent protects or comforts the child, the fear response is quelled; and the exploration and play motivational systems open up (the child runs off to learn). If children experience fear when they are away from their parents, but can remember or imagine the protection and comfort of their parents, they can regulate, soothe and comfort themselves; they can re-group and go out to play or deal again. They are becoming resilient.

The attunement of early attachment builds a healthy resonance circuit in our brains. Very briefly: neural networks fire in the brain when we “read” another’s facial expressions, eye gaze, body language, or hear the emotional meaning of their



tone of voice. With input from the emotional processing center of the limbic system, signals travel in these networks – in the junction of the temporal-parietal lobes (where “mirror-like” networks are) and in the insula (the structure of interoception; of knowing what’s going on in one’s body) – up to the prefrontal cortex. This is when we “know” what the other person is feeling, and it’s the foundation of the next function of the prefrontal cortex – empathy.

The prefrontal cortex takes up to 25 years to fully mature, well into adulthood. So there are many opportunities for the brains of others – including relatives, teachers, coaches, peers, and partners – to help the prefrontal cortex of the child’s brain mature the resonance circuit that supports the capacities of resilience. And even after the child becomes an adult and the prefrontal cortex becomes stable in its functioning, and the neural circuits of response to life become somewhat fixed, automatic and predictable (sometimes seemingly intractable), the brain retains the capacity to grow new neurons and re-wire its circuitry. It’s the plasticity of the brain and the ongoing experiences of “feeling felt” that help us continue to mature, or recover in the first place, these attuning capacities of the prefrontal cortex well into adulthood.

Empathy

The roots of resilience are to be found in the felt sense of existing in the heart and mind of an empathic, attuned, self-possessed other.

Diana Fosha

Neuropsychologists see empathy as the integration of body-based information, emotional signals, and cognitive thought and beliefs about another’s experience; making sense, making meaning, creating understanding, and then checking out the accuracy of that understanding through a verbal feedback loop. I experienced the difference between attunement and empathy when my mother died. Many, many good people could attune to the grief and disorientation I was feeling. And I found it was the people who had lost someone to death themselves who could deeply understand and convey that empathic understanding of what I was going through, oftentimes more than I could grasp myself at that moment.

Neuropsychologists now posit that it was the need among our ancestors on the savannah to understand quickly what other members of the tribe needed to communicate in terms of potential danger to the tribe, and the need to nurture a growing child and developing brain through such a long period of dependence and maturation, that was the most influential factor in driving the evolutionary development of the “higher” human brain (the complex frontal lobes of the cortex that eventually developed language and all the capacities of thinking, evaluating and planning).

The prefrontal cortex, through self attunement and self empathy, allows us to integrate all the parts of who we are – including split off, exiled parts – so we have all of the innate wisdom from all layers of our being, and so we use up less energy managing those split off parts through denial and dissociation. This integration produces so many resources and frees up so much energy for

resilience.

The prefrontal cortex, through attunement and social engagement with others, integrates our experience of self and others with other people's experience of self and others (including us). Brains develop in interactions with other brains, and the prefrontal cortex allows us to learn how to live life resiliently from people close to us, as well as from mentors, role models and literary and historical figures. We can take in their resilience and help it inform and expand ours.

Response Flexibility

We see the integrative function of the prefrontal cortex operating on steroids in the capacity of response flexibility: the capacity to stop, hold the experience (whatever it is), regulate the body arousal and emotional waves triggered by it, step back (which may require lots of practice disentangling from one's experience in the moment and seeing clearly that this is one experience in one moment, not the only truth forevermore), think, reflect, and evaluate. And then, from unentangled engagement and responsiveness, choose wisely and act.

Response flexibility is the fulcrum of resilience. (And it's where most coaching about resilience begins.) In order to cope with change, we have to be able to change how we cope. The more flexible someone can be (not chaotic or floundering, but simply no longer embedded in their neural cement), the more options they can identify, and the more resilient they can be.

I recently learned an excellent protocol to promote response flexibility, from Alan Marlatt who uses it in recovery programs. It has the acronym, S.O.B.E.R.

STOP – The reactive emotional system gets a few second hand start on the prefrontal cortex when we feel stressed or upset, so we need to pause to

Words of Wisdom:

Resilience

The Buddhist teachings are fabulous at simply working with what's happening as your path of awakening, rather than treating your life experiences as some kind of deviation from what is supposed to be happening. The more difficulties you have, in fact, the greater opportunity there is to let them transform you. The difficult things provoke all your irritations and bring your habitual patterns to the surface. And that becomes the moment of truth. You have the choice to launch into the lousy habitual patterns you already have, or to stay with the rawness and discomfort of the situation and let it transform you, on the spot.

Pema Chodron

We all accept that no one controls the weather. Good sailors learn to read it carefully and respect its power. They will avoid storms if possible, but then caught in one, they know when to take down the sails, batten down the hatches, drop anchor and ride things out, controlling what is controllable and letting go of the rest. Training, practice, and a lot of firsthand experience in all sorts of weather are required to develop such skills so that they work for you when you need them. Developing skill in facing and effectively handling the various "weather conditions" in your life is what we mean by the art of conscious living.

Jon Kabat-Zinn

hold the turbo-charged reactivity of the ANS and the amygdala. Just counting to ten, or five deep breaths, is often enough for the prefrontal cortex to be available to process the experience.

OBSERVE – Mindfulness practice is exquisitely excellent in training the mind to observe what is happening in the mind and body, or the external environment, without reactivity or judgment, without moving to fix or running away. Mindfulness breaks the automaticity of our habitual reactions and allows us to see clearly what is actually happening out there and in our inner landscape of response.

BREATHE – Deep breathing does calm down the nervous system (back to the window of tolerance, always back to the window of tolerance) and creates the pause we need to see clearly.

EXPAND PERSPECTIVE – To be resilient, we must be able to disembody from the neural cement of habitual response; to detach from the experience for a moment, and see the experience of the

moment as only one possible experience of many moments. The experience of this moment is here now, but is not the only experience in this moment, and it is not the only moment in a life. When we can disentangle, step back, and reflect, we can move from “poor me” to an empowered “I” that can act on its own behalf. This expanded perspective allows us to see any previous patterns of response as patterns. There can be new responses, new patterns, and once we see that, even once, the door is open to look for options and choices about anything and everything.

RESPOND WISELY – Role models and proven paths of wise effort (letting go of the unskillful or unwholesome, cultivating the skillful or the wholesome) can be great guides to making resilient choices once we see, from an expanded perspective, that we have choices. The most skillful action at the moment may be to endure, **SOBER**, in faith that eventually we can effect change, because it is in the nature of everything to change.

Insight

The integrative capacity of the prefrontal cortex is also essential to be able to take in the difficult truth of trauma or tragedy – that “bad things happen to good people.” To cope with the mysterious and precarious unpredictability of life, we have to be able to expand our perspective from “why me?” to “why not me?” The realization that one’s pain is part of the pain of the



Between a stimulus and 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

human condition, allows one to get on with the work of coping.

The prefrontal cortex is what creates the coherent narrative of a life; making sense and meaning of everything that is happening to us as it happens (or after the fact, as in wise retrospect). To make sense of everything that has ever happened to us in one coherent whole, we must be able to integrate “here’s what happened; here’s what I did or didn’t do; here’s how well that worked, or not; here’s what I’ve learned; here’s what I would do differently now or here’s how I’m different now.”

The prefrontal cortex creates the neural integration of the “story” – how we relate to our experience – that becomes the platform for Dan Siegel’s acronym for mental health, FACES: to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. That is the platform for the next step into the unfolding unknown.

Intuition

Besides a clearer and more conscious knowing of what’s what and what choices we can make to cope most resiliently, the prefrontal cortex allows a person to sense into their own core values, to know at a deeply intuitive level what’s right for them . . . or not. We call this a gut feeling because the ANS – breath, heart and gut - are involved. But intuition is a deep and profound

knowing often below the level of conscious processing of what makes the most sense. The prefrontal cortex integrates that “felt” knowing with conscious knowing and allows intuition to guide our choices. (See Exercises to Practice below for simple way to tune in to your own intuition.)

Morality

The words integration and integrity have the same Latin root, meaning “whole” or “entire.” This last function of the prefrontal cortex – morality – is not about right or wrong in the sense of following the rules. It’s more based on empathy and an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all beings, so that we can make choices not just for personal survival (which the amygdala does full-time) but for the common good. And when we can let ourselves care about the common good

There are no mistakes when there is learning.

Julia Butterfly Hill, environmental activist

and receive from the common good, we can be much more connected and much more resilient.

Exercises

Exercise #1: Hand on the Heart

I’ve offered this exercise to activate the social engagement system and keep us in the window of tolerance. It’s worth its weight in gold.

Place your hand on your heart. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance or ease, that you can muster. Once that’s steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe

with. This may not always be a partner or a parent or a child. Those relationships can be so complex and the feelings mixed. This may be a good friend, a trusted teacher. It may be your therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher, a beloved pet. Pets are great.

As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can feel the feelings and sensations that come up with that memory in your body. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust and love in your body. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling for 30 seconds.

Why might this practice help keep us in the window of tolerance? The hand on the heart and the deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and calms us down. Evoking the image of feeling safe and loved can activate the release of oxytocin in the brain.

Exercise #2. Quelling the Fear Response

Think of someone who loves you, supports you, believes in you. It helps if you are remembering or imagining someone who is somewhat resilient themselves, but it's more important that you feel safe, connected, understood, and cared about by them. This could be anyone; a partner, friend, parent, child, grandparent, teacher, coach, pet,

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

or perhaps a spiritual figure or mentor like the Buddha, Jesus or the Dalai Lama. Or you may choose to think of several people. (When someone has to face a boss or a doctor, it's sometimes helpful to have a roomful, a whole circle.) Let yourself feel this sense of love and support throughout your body. Really soak it in and savor it. This is your refuge for pre-empting stress, and your resource for coping with whatever might come up as you go through your day.

Exercise #3: Regulate Emotions

This is an exercise to create the inner space where emotions can be skillfully felt, processed, and moved through. First, sit quietly and comfortably. Breathe gently into your belly, slowly in and out, bringing a sense of goodness into your belly. Breathe into your belly as though you were safe.

Now remember people or things in your life you are grateful for. Savor the gratefulness throughout your body. Remember moments of kindness in your life, when people have been kind to you, and when you have been kind to others. Savor the feeling of kindness throughout your body. Remember a moment of feeling loved and cherished by someone,

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then remember a moment of you loving and cherishing someone, even a beloved pet. Savor the feeling of love throughout your body. Let yourself claim the goodness of your own self now.

Then bring into this field of positive emotional energy and well-being a memory of loss, sadness or grief. Maybe not the most overwhelming experience in your memory bank, but an experience of sadness, current or past. Remain mindful of the feeling of the positive state in your body, and allow the feeling of the sadness to be present in your body at the same time. Simply notice what's happening to the feeling state in your body, noticing and being with. And when you're ready, letting them move through.

Exercise #4: Feeling Felt

This exercise requires working with someone who can be present, open, engaged and curious, about anything, while also being able to tune in to you in the moment. Someone who can pay attention and “read” your facial expressions, interpret the body language of your postures and gestures and hear the meaning in your tone of voice. Someone who can resonate (from within themselves) with your experience in the moment.

Attunement is deep listening, below the level of words, to the emotional meaning of your experience. This attuned listener could be a partner, a good friend, a therapist, or someone completely outside your regular acquaintance. I've told the story before of a nurse who simply

sat with me in the parking lot of the skilled nursing facility where my 80 year old dad refused to stay after a stroke. She simply tuned into my grief, confusion and despair, holding her hand on my back until I calmed down. No words, just presence, until I could re-group and find the resilience to bring my dad home for another nine months of pretty good living until he died. That's attunement creating the neural conditions of resilience.

Find a partner you can share an emotional experience with (a positive, joyful experience counts, too!). Sense their “getting” you, resonating with you, even without words. Please practice this exercise with various people until you find someone who can indeed be a true other to your true self.

Exercise #5: Self-Empathy

This exercise is for the parts of yourself that



may be struggling to be resilient.

Identify any voices in your “inner committee” that are struggling to be resilient in the current moment; any parts that are scared or shamed or too angry to think clearly. Let them into your awareness, let them be without trying to change them or push them away again. Then, to create the self-empathy for them, bring to mind someone you love, someone you can unreservedly, unconditionally love. This could be a benefactor, a dear friend, a beloved child or a beloved pet. Feel the love you feel for them in your body. Sense the flow of love from you to them. Then, when that’s steady, simply slip the struggling parts of your inner self into that flow. Keep the love and empathy flowing. Don’t blink an eye. Let the love and empathy flow to yourself. If you can, let yourself receive the love

and empathy; receive the care, feeling loved and cared for by your larger self. Once these parts feel accepted and included (this is the integrative function of the prefrontal cortex at work par excellence) your wiser self can once again be in charge of responding flexibly to the situation.

Exercise #6: Response Flexibility

Here’s one exercise to help with the Expand Perspective step of S.O.B.E.R.

Sit quietly. Focus your attention on one particular challenging situation in your life right now. Perhaps not the most difficult right off the bat, but something sticky you’d like to practice expanding your perspective around. Allow yourself to sit with the whole of the experience for the moment, noticing the way it feels in your body, the emotions it evokes, any thoughts and beliefs about yourself coming into awareness. Then remember the many other things going on in your life at this very same moment; the people, activities, other priorities or interests that may have been pushed to the background temporarily. Especially identify things in your life that are not this problem. Place the challenge in the context of the whole of your life. Then begin to imagine how you might be relating to this experience a year from now, and then five years from now; see the challenge in the context of your entire life. Begin to see how this problem is not the only thing happening in your life at the moment, and this moment is not the only moment in your life. Sense a spaciousness in your

Words of Wisdom:

Resilience

I'm no longer afraid of storms, for I've learned to sail my ship.

Louise May Alcott

Suffering alone cannot break the human spirit. Human sorrow is not a pathology; it is a poignant inheritance we share with all the family of the earth. In the face of whatever loss, illness, or harm we are given, we remain people of great courage, wisdom and healing.

Wayne Muller

Making your mark on the world is hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it. But it's not. It takes patience, it takes commitment, and it comes with plenty of failure along the way. The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.

Barack Obama



consciousness about this problem, and from the spaciousness begin to identify different possible responses, even if they are a stretch compared to what has been possible before.

Exercise #7: Coherent Narrative

This exercise is to integrate at least one troubling or traumatizing experience from the past into the coherent narrative of your life now. Remember an event that was troubling or traumatizing for you in the past. State as objectively as you can “here’s what happened.” Remember what you did to cope at the time, how you survived. Identify what you learned from the experience, what you would do differently now that you couldn’t do then. (If you haven’t done this step of learning up until now, take the time to do it now.) Have the sense strongly that you are who you are now, remembering what happened then. Have a sense of yourself now, large enough to hold what happened then.

Decide for yourself right now how you will hold what happened then in the story you have of your life now, how it’s part of the meaning of your life now, how it contains lessons learned or skills developed. If you can identify how what happened has contributed to your resilience now, great, but at least accept that what happened did

happen, and it is included – not pushed away – part of who you are now. No shame, no blame, just part of the resilience you have now.

Exercise #8: Intuition

I’ve often done this technique with clients and with myself and it works more often than not. Say you have to make a decision and you’re ambivalent, both sides have pros and cons and you’re not sure what to do. Decide in your mind which one of these decisions is heads and the other is tails.

Notice what happens when you toss the coin. It’s not that the coin toss decides, but there can be an instant flash of knowing whether you were glad for the decision and relieved, or you were disappointed. That flicker of gladness or disappointment is your gut reaction, your intuition telling you what you’re feeling right away. You don’t have to follow it, but it’s there.

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Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.