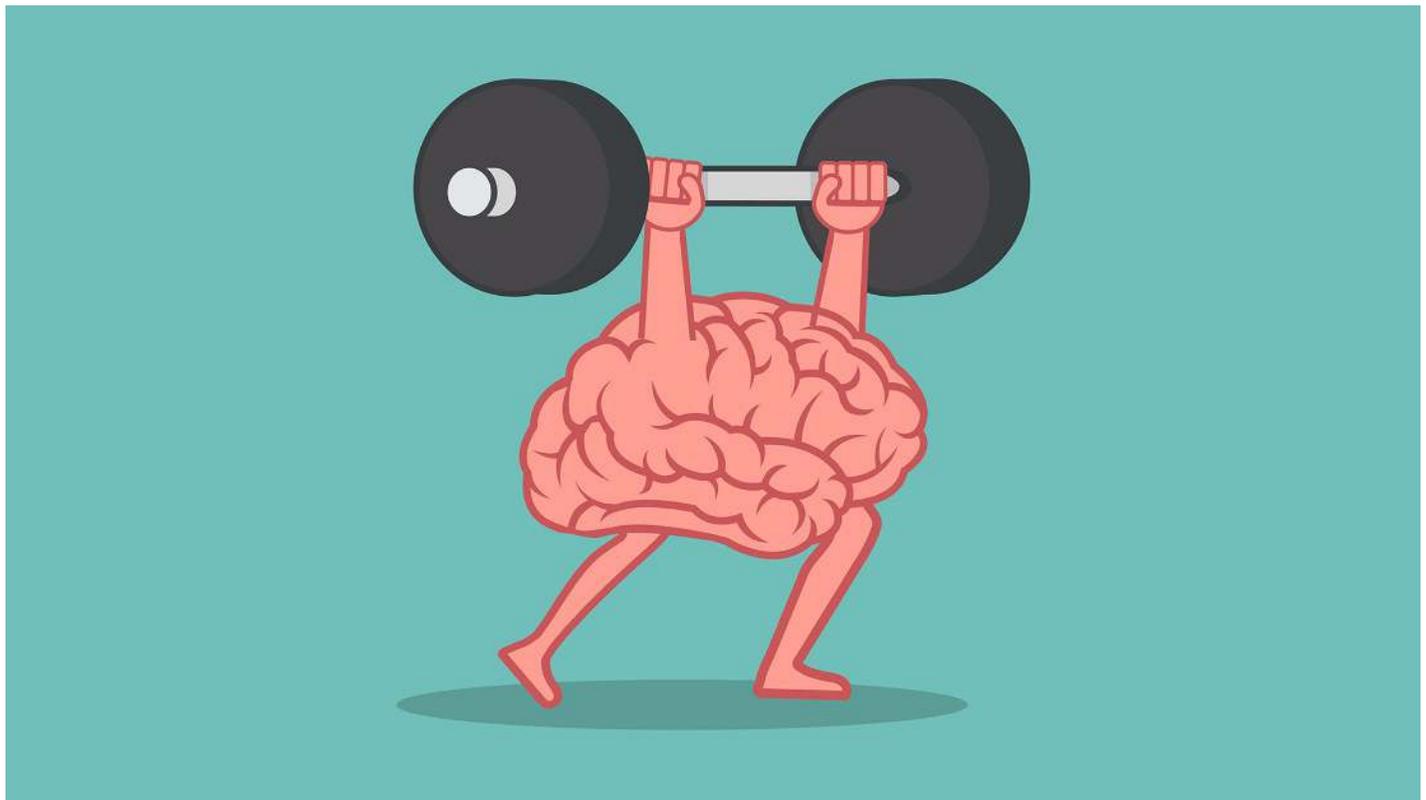


## Train Your Brain to Build Resilience

Getting back up when you stumble may seem easier for some than it does for others. The good news is, resilience is a like a muscle—here's how you can strengthen yours over time.

BY [LINDA GRAHAM](#) | SEPTEMBER 15, 2019 | [MEDITATION](#)



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It's one thing to misplace your keys or your wallet two minutes before you have to rush out the door for work. You do your best to breathe slowly, stay calm, and try to think if maybe you were wearing something else with pockets before the early morning mad dash. We all experience these hiccups in life—dropping the lasagna on the way to serve guests, leaving a laptop on a plane, learning that the car needs a new transmission—and



But usually we can right ourselves again. We put on our big-kid pants, face the distress of the moment, and deal.

Occasionally we are called on to deal with greater troubles and adversities, not just hiccups but earthquakes that overwhelm our capacities to cope, at least temporarily. They include troubles like infertility or infidelity, a diagnosis of cancer, losing a job several years out from retirement, a child arrested for selling pot, or a relative wounded in combat overseas. When these bigger bumps happen, we have to dig deeper into our inner reserves of resilience and our memories of times when we've successfully coped before, while also drawing on external resources such as family and friends. Here, too, finding our way back to our center, our inner equilibrium and ability to cope, can be more difficult if we are told we are—or perceive ourselves as—less than capable, less than skillful, less than good enough, or unworthy of help.

***When these bigger bumps happen, we have to dig deeper into our inner reserves of resilience and our memories of times when we've successfully coped before, while also drawing on external resources such as family and friends.***

And then there are times when too damn many disasters happen all at once: We lose a child in a car accident, or cause a car accident, at the same time that an aging parent has a stroke and a freak thunderstorm causes flood damage to half the house. When catastrophes like these strike, we are vulnerable to losing our resilience altogether, temporarily or even for a long time. If we have experienced too many unresolved traumas in the past, we can be especially susceptible to falling apart and not being able to recover. When our reserves are already depleted, we can begin to feel like we're just barely afloat and about to go under.

How in the world do we bounce back from traumas like these? By strengthening our resilience.



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the survival and thriving of human beings and human societies.

We now also know that resilience is one behavioral outcome of a mature, well-functioning prefrontal cortex in the brain. Importantly, whether we're facing a series of small annoyances or an utter disaster, resilience is *teachable, learnable, and recoverable*. It takes practice, and it takes awareness, but that power always lies within us.

## Your Flexible Brain

All of the capacities that develop and strengthen your resilience—inner calm in the midst of the storms, seeing options clearly, shifting perspectives and responding flexibly, choosing actions, persevering in the face of doubt and discouragement—are innate in your being because they are evolutionarily innate in your brain.

*Neuroplasticity* means that all the capacities of resilience you need are learnable and recoverable. Even if you didn't fully develop your capacities for resilience in early life, you can develop them now. The neural networks underlying your coping strategies and behaviors can be shaped and modified by your own choices, by self-directed neuroplasticity.

This requires the engagement of the prefrontal cortex, the center of executive function in the brain. It's the structure we rely on most for our planning, decision-making, analyses, and judgments. The prefrontal cortex also performs many other functions essential to our resilience: It regulates function of the body and the nervous system, manages a broad range of emotions, and quells the fear response of the amygdala. (That quelling is essential for resilience!)

We now know that experience is the catalyst of the brain's neuroplasticity and learning for our entire lives. At any time, we can choose the experiences that direct the brain's learning toward better functioning. Resilience can be diminished (for example, by the impact of acute trauma) or strengthened (through the perception of safety; by being understood and accepted by another person; through conscious reflection, such as mindfulness; and with the cultivation of positive emotions) at any time by experience.

## How Emotions Impact Resilience



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the future when a spouse or child gets a life-threatening diagnosis.

Whether we like having these emotions or not, whether we trust them or know what to do with them or not, our feelings constantly filter our perceptions and guide (or sometimes misguide) our responses to all of our experiences. In that way, our emotions play an integral role in our resilience.

When the self-regulating capacity of your brain is functioning well, you can inhabit or quickly recover a felt sense of centeredness, ease, and well-being after an upsetting event. You regain your equilibrium. From there you can perceive clearly what's triggering your emotions and discern what a wise response to those triggers would be.

For example, we know it's *not* resilient to be hijacked by floods of emotions: You can't think straight, and your responses may be useless or harmful. And it's not resilient to try to repress your emotions. For one thing, it takes an enormous amount of physical and psychological energy to do that, energy you would be better off using to respond to the situation or to other people wisely. Secondly, when you try to repress any specific emotion (anger, grief, and shame are common targets), you can wind up damping down all of your emotions, even the helpful ones. You can go flat in your being and lose the motivation to do anything at all.

## Taking Back the Reins

What you can do instead is learn to manage surges of negative emotions and intentionally cultivate positive ones, such as kindness, gratitude, generosity, delight, and awe. Positive emotions shift the brain out of the contraction and reactivity of the negativity bias, into the receptivity and openness that increase your response flexibility. The direct measurable outcome of these practices is resilience.

Focusing on positive emotions is not meant to bypass or suppress dark, difficult, afflictive ones. Your experiences of angst, pain, and despair are very real. But you can learn to acknowledge, hold, and process those emotions. You broaden your habitual modes of thinking or acting and build enduring, resilient resources for coping. These include increasing social bonds and social support and deepening insights that help place events in a broader context. You find a way through, and come out the other side.



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You do have to take responsibility for how you experience and express them.

## Practice: Taking In the Good

—Adapted from Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness*

1. Pause for a moment and notice any experience of kindness, gratitude, or awe that you have experienced today or remember from the past. Maybe your neighbor drove you to and from work for three days while your car was in the shop, or you saw a blue heron rise up from a pond at dusk.
2. Attune to the felt sense of the goodness of this moment—a warmth in your body, a lightness in your heart, a little recognition of “Wow, this is terrific!”
3. Focus your awareness on this felt sense of goodness for 10–30 seconds. Savor it slowly, allowing your brain the time it needs to really register the experience and store it in long-term memory.
4. Set the intention to evoke this memory five more times today. This repeats the neural firing in your brain, recording the memory so you can recollect it later, making it a resource for your own sense of emotional well-being, and thus strengthening the inner secure base of resilience.
5. As you experience and re-experience the moment, register that not only are you doing this, you are learning *how* to do this. You are becoming competent at creating new neural circuitry for resilience.

## Practice: Tune In to Act Wisely

The practices of attending and attuning will begin creating the space to help you respond to emotions in a new and more resilient way. Regular practice will make it easier to shift from negativity to positivity. Apply the principle of little and often. Practice again and again until these skills become the new habits of perceiving and responding to your emotional landscape. Then you can choose your response.

### Attending



1. Sit quietly in a place where you won't be interrupted for at least five minutes. Come into a sense of presence, knowing you are here, in your body, in your mind, in this moment, in this place.
2. Whatever body sensation, feeling, or thought comes up, simply notice it, acknowledge that it has shown up on your radar, allow it to be there, and accept that it is there. At this point you're not wondering about it or trying to figure it out, just attending to it enough to register the experience in your awareness.
3. At this stage in the exercise, you have come to a choice point. You can let go of attending to the experience of the moment and refocus your attention on the quiet, spacious awareness, or you can attune to the felt sense of the experience to decipher its message.

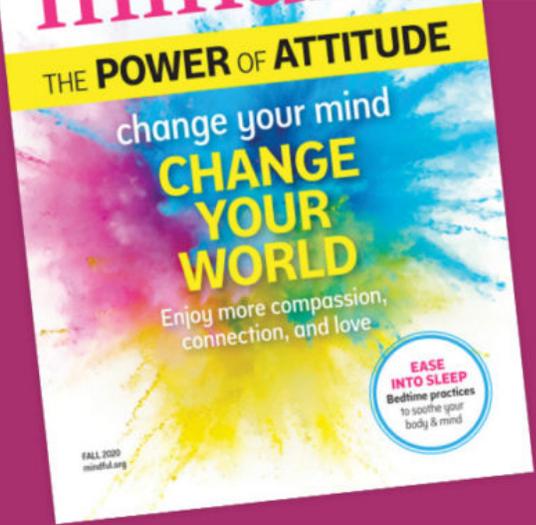
## Attuning

*This practice entails discerning the particular flavor of an emotion. It helps you learn to label complex, subtly nuanced emotions, such as those of feeling lonely or suspicious, which builds your emotional literacy.*

1. See if you can identify any feeling or sensation in the experience you were attending to in your body. Begin to label it—shaky, tight, churning, bubbling, contracting, expanding. Try not to create a story about it. Just feel it and name it.
2. Sometimes it's a challenge to put your finger on the exact nuance or flavor of the message. So just try to find a good enough label for now: "This is contentment," "This is aggravation," or "This is despair."
3. Whatever feeling you are attuning to, and however you choose to label it, this feeling is what it is. All you have to know at this point is that you can know what it is and label it in a way that is useful to you. You can trust in your ability to know and label a feeling even if you change your mind later about what it is. Once you can name an emotion, you are on the way to making sense of it and taking wise action toward dealing with it.

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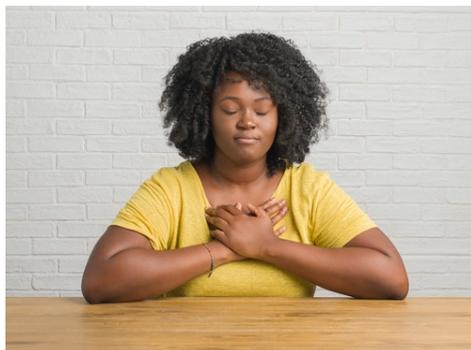
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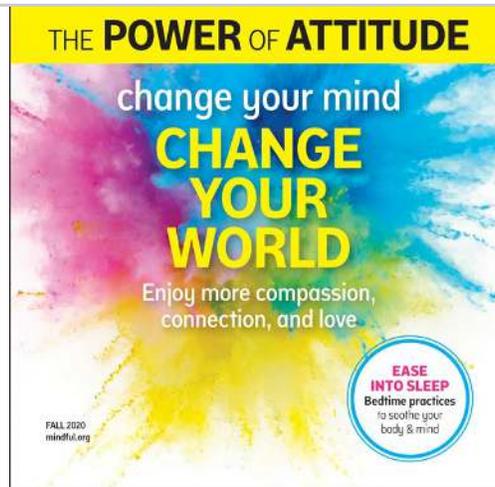
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