



Resilience. Can I Build It?

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In the wake of the pandemic, people all over the world, although physically isolated, are united in their challenges, fears, anxiety, grief, and loss of normalcy. For more than a year we're experiencing events that we haven't been prepared for, loss and loneliness which we may have never experienced before. Some can cope with it, while a significant number of us have become victims of mental health problems.

Life does not come with a pre-planned map. We experience ups and downs and face all kinds of challenges and adversities. Each one of us gets affected differently and experiences varied thoughts, emotions, and uncertainties. The ability to adapt to change or manage stress easily relies on our resilience. When resilience is low, we become a victim of anxiety, stress, negative thinking, depression and more. All external events trigger internal thoughts. It's not the event itself, but the way we think about the event that determines our life experiences. The pandemic has affected us all worldwide, but our

reactions to it may be completely different. While the outside trigger remains the same, each one of us responds to it differently. Our thoughts are constantly creating our reality and negative thoughts lead to mental health issues and affect our resilience.

Negative thoughts are toxic. Let me explain why. One might think that it's just one single thought, but it begins with one and leads to another. Think of it as a tap leaking drops of water. It starts with a single drop and over time builds into a small puddle and then it becomes a pond and before you know it you are drowning in a river of your own negative thinking. This way of thinking can soon become a habit that you unconsciously fall into. That's the most dangerous place to be in. Our habitual thoughts become our way of life and define the quality of our life. If we don't learn to manage the negative voices in our head, we can end up locking ourselves into the "hell" of our own minds.

Let's explore what thoughts are. Thoughts are nothing but an internal stream of dialogue that is going on in your head all the time. Even at this moment, while you are reading this article, there is constant chatter in the back of your mind. Did you know on average we have 90,000 thoughts a day? What is amazing is that 80% of these thoughts are negative and 90% are repetitive. According to studies done in the field of neuroscience, the more negative the experience, the more we return to it again and again. So, if the experience is intensely negative, we will retain it in our head longer and we will go back to it and relive it yet again. Imagine if you go to a restaurant and you don't like the food and if it is a completely negative experience, you will remember it and next time you will think twice before going to that restaurant. You may even go and do negative publicity of the restaurant. But if the experience is good, you may probably go again and recommend it to ten other people.

As human beings, we are hard-wired to focus on the negative. There is a term for it in psychology called negative bias. Negative bias means that our brain is more responsive to negative things than positive ones. Focusing more on the negative rather than on the positive is simply a way the brain tries to keep us safe. Can we truly remain safe with this kind of negative bias? It's a part of our evolution that we can trace back to times when we were living in caves. We had to be attentive to every threat around us, be it an animal, person, or even the weather, to survive. Our bodies and minds were attuned to focusing on the external threats because it was a matter of survival. It helped us back then when our physical safety was under threat all the time. Do negativity bias and the constant focus on all that is negative around us, work for us now? No, it does not! But we are hardwired to focus on the negative which means that we need to consciously work on it.

Let me share my recent story. I got COVID and during the same time, I came to know that both my

parents were also COVID positive. They were both doing well for the first few days, but suddenly the tables turned and on the fifth day I lost my father and the next day, my mother. Losing both parents in less than 24 hours, I was devastated and in a state of complete shock. I was broken and did not feel like getting out of bed in the morning because I was so filled with grief. I did not know what to do and felt as if my world had suddenly come to a standstill. Everyone kept telling me I have to be strong, but how could I? I was in complete denial and was locked into the "hell" of my mind. I realised that there are so many things in life that are out of my control, but the one thing that is in my control is how I explain things that happen to me to my own self. So, I asked myself, "What are my thoughts about losing my parents?" It's about how we think about the event and how we explain it to our own selves. I took a pause and realised that it is time for me to practice all the things that I keep talking about and the lessons that I have learnt over the years. I changed the way I was talking to myself about the loss and it helped me change my emotions and my behaviour. This is resilience, the most powerful skill that one can develop.

Every time I think negatively, I will have an emotion of anger, fear, anxiety, upset, sadness, etc. Each of these emotions results in behaviour or action. Let us look at the above example. Suppose my thoughts were, "Why me? Why does it happen to me all the time? It is not fair! I cannot handle it." These thoughts may lead to an emotion of anger, anxiety, frustration or even a sense of helplessness. The behaviour, as a result, could be crying, blaming or frequent outburst of anger, not feeling energetic enough, not feeling productive enough, feeling helpless or feeling like a victim. You have a thought, thought leads to an emotion and the emotion leads to a certain kind of behaviour. You either express the emotion or you suppress it. The origin of everything, an emotion or a behaviour, is the thought that you are choosing to entertain. Now let

us look at another example. Imagine a thought is, “This experience will build strength for me. It will give me new ways to deal with life’s challenges.” What is going to be the emotion then? It will lead to an emotion of curiosity, hope, courage, sense of feeling safe, and will lead to a behaviour of wanting to try out new things, being more proactive, expressing gratitude, focusing on what is working in your life, being open to change or trying out new things.

Resilience is a psychological quality that allows a person to bounce back or recover faster from adversities. Highly resilient people find a way to work through the challenges, heal emotionally and move towards achieving their goals rather than allowing failure and difficulties to drain them or affect them mentally and emotionally.

You cannot control everything that happens to you but you can only control the way you respond to the external event. It doesn’t mean that you won’t experience difficulty or emotional pain and stress, but that you will be able to cope with it more effectively. Resilience is an ability that can be acquired. It involves developing thoughts, behaviours, and actions that allow you to recover from difficult or stressful situations in life. It protects you from various mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. Stress and anxiety tend to lower resilience.

Let’s look at some of the features of a resilient person-

- Having positive views of one’s self and abilities
- Having faith and belief in self
- Having the ability to make realistic plans and stick to them
- Recognizing one’s limitations
- Being optimistic and having positive attitude

- Viewing change as a challenge or opportunity and adapting to change easily
- Viewing oneself as a fighter rather than a victim
- Managing and controlling emotions effectively

What Can We Do to Become More Resilient?

First, we must address our negative thought cycle. I sometimes find myself dwelling on negative thoughts, getting myself worked up more and more as I think about it until I either break down or burst out with anger. When this happens, my negative thought cycles have complete control over me. I know that at that moment no amount of positive thinking is going to change my negative emotions. I have learnt my lesson and instead of trying to think my way out of my emotions, which is hard when my negative emotions are strong, I either go for a walk or engage myself in cooking. This change in behaviour helps both my mind and body to switch gears and focus on something else. This breaks the negative thought cycle. Rather than trying to control your negative thoughts, engage yourself in some activity. Being resilient means seeing that negative thoughts come and go and handling them more effectively.

Change Your Mindset and View Things That You Think You Will Possibly Fail at, as Challenges

Most of us are afraid of failure and feel ashamed when we fail in life. This attitude never allows us to overcome challenges and practise resilience. Take a moment to remember the smallest thing that you have successfully achieved in the past. Visualize that success and write down a list of things you learned from it. When you remind yourself that you have succeeded in the past, reviewing things that you learned from the past and imagining yourself doing well, will help you shift your mindset.

Distance Yourself Emotionally from the Challenge

Refer to yourself in the third person or by your name. Using the third person in self-talk helps you step back and think more objectively about your responses and emotions. Being an outside observer makes the experience seem less intense. Remember, your thoughts are the source of your emotions and moods and they influence how you feel about yourself and react in everyday life.

Find the Silver Linings

Seeing the positive in situations generates positive emotions, decreases stress, and helps recover from challenging events faster. Suppose I dropped my lunch box and have nothing else to eat. I could get upset about going hungry and blame myself or I could take it as an opportunity to approach a friend and share their lunch. Try to be creative and think of what can make you feel better at that moment.

A few years ago, my car broke down and refused to start. I immediately felt grateful that I wasn't driving on the highway and was close to my house. I could have focused on the negative things about it and started panicking and thinking of the worst that could happen. But my brain focused on the positive, as I have trained my mind to have a positive mindset. You can change your mindset by focusing on the good and ignoring the bad. Remind yourself to embrace and enjoy the small joys and pleasures. Sit down and create a list of 10 things you can do consciously that give you pleasure. Remind yourself every day of the things you are grateful for. Showing gratitude and being thankful daily helps build resilience.

Use Negative Emotions to Create Change in Your Life

It is also important to know that experiencing negative emotions is normal. Allow yourself to express

and feel your emotions. Pushing away or suppressing negative emotions can result in a rebound effect and you may find yourself thinking about it more and more. So, when life throws you into a drain, or if you are experiencing painful emotions, ask yourself, "Is this negative emotion trying to teach me something? What can I do to stop this negative emotion from developing again in the future?" Use negative emotions to create change in your life.

Be Optimistic

It's difficult to remain positive when life gets challenging. An optimistic attitude allows you to imagine that good things are just around the corner. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about your fears and challenges. Visualization is a very effective technique when you are not able to stop the cycle of negative thoughts.

Last but not the least, **identify your strengths**. Believe in yourself and believe that nothing is permanent in life and no challenge lasts forever.

Let me conclude with a wonderful analogy about the honeybee and the fly. It teaches us a valuable lesson to improve the quality of life. The honey bee flies from flower to flower, extracting only the nectar without disturbing the flower. The mindset of the honeybee is to seek the essence of each flower. Even in a place filled with rotten garbage, it keeps the focus only on finding the nectar. It even eagerly flies to a single tiny flower amidst miles and miles of garbage. On the other hand, the mindset of the fly is completely different. It will focus on sucking an infectious scab. It may fly over thousands of flowers, but will only search for garbage and ignore the sweet fragrance of flowers. This represents the mindset of ignoring the good qualities and focusing only on the negatives. There will be flaws everywhere. You may find flaws in situations, other people or often about yourself. The more you give in to it, the more you get caught in your minds "hell".

The more you focus on flaws and negativity around you, the more it affects your ability to be resilient. **The choice is yours. Do you want to be like the honeybee or the fly?** [1-9].

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