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## Resilience: What is it and how to develop it

By Jamie Jacobs-May

**A**s we face the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us have experienced anything from noticeable stress to serious health or financial problems. Are our law practices facing financial ruin? Is emotional upheaval affecting our relationships? How do we deal with this crisis?

Fortunately, there are adaptive strategies that can help. The study of resilience aims to identify the characteristics and approaches that allow us to adapt well to change and adversity. Early research on resilience, published in the 1970s, focused on children who grew up in poverty and were exposed to parental abuse. The children who ultimately became more successful than their peers were called “resilient.” It is no wonder that many of us still think of resilience as the ability to rebound from trauma.

More recent research has linked resilience to the successful adaptation to changing environments. As we know, change can be difficult. It can lead to stress, anger, fear, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, depression and distractibility. It can cause our performance to suffer. We are less able to process information than when we are at our best, and our responses can be rigid and inflexible. Thus, resilience is the ability to adapt, learn, grow and thrive during times of adversity, challenge and change.

Resilience does not only apply to individuals. Organizations



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also strive to be resilient. To survive in uncertain environments, organizations must adapt. They must develop the capacity to deal with unexpected events, to cope with crises, and to perceive and capitalize on opportunities. Resilience, seen this way, is a source of sustained competitive advantage.

Whether we focus on individuals or organizations, certain qualities can enhance performance and make us more resilient. Here are three:

### 1. Realistic Optimism

Optimism is an attitude about the future that things will turn out well. It fuels resilience. Realistic optimism is constrained by available data. It is not blind optimism, which is illusory, often excessive and always without evidentiary support. Unrealistic optimism can be detrimental and result in underestimating risk.

Thus, a realistic optimist sees the glass as half full, while a

blind optimist sees mirages. A realistic optimist has the ability to perceive events in a positive light, and can take a step back from the maelstrom and observe stressful situations from different perspectives. This attitude increases positive emotions, which can broaden our thinking and help us to become more creative and flexible. We are then able to reframe, reappraise and see things in a more positive light. Winston Churchill’s quote hits the mark: “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

Maintaining this attitude is not easy; biology has conspired against us. Research demonstrates that our brains draw our attention to dangerous and negative stimuli rather than pleasurable ones. From an evolutionary perspective, survival depended upon focusing on the saber-toothed tigers instead of the delicious berries. It seems

that we are all wired to attend to signs of adversity. And the media, which constantly inundates us with information, is chock full of negativity.

Still, optimists and pessimists differ in their responses. Pessimists perseverate over bad news, fail to recognize potentially positive outcomes, and see ambiguities in a negative light. They tend to believe negative consequences will be permanent, and will be universal, intruding on all aspects of life. Optimists, on the other hand, are not flooded by the sea of negative and sensational talk. They tend to perceive adverse events as temporary in duration and limited in scope, recognizing that not all domains of life may be affected.

When we find ourselves mired in negative thinking and worry, there are techniques to help us see things more realistically and optimistically. Though we cannot control events, we can control our reaction to them. We can focus on the positive things around us. We can “change the channel” by going for a walk, playing a game, taking a shower or cooking a meal. Anything we do that gives us pleasure and gives us a break can change our mood and our attitude.

The single most important thing we can do involves our inner dialogue. The stories we tell ourselves can drive outcomes. They can define us: They can shape our identities, aspirations, and experiences, and set the parameters for what we can achieve. When we think “The

odds are against me,” “This is too hard” or simply “I can’t,” if left unexamined these ideas can become our realities. The American Bar Association’s National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being concluded that that monitoring and disputing automatic negative self-talk is the core technique for putting adverse events in a rational context and preventing us from being overwhelmed by catastrophic thinking. The secret is to identify the existence of a negative story, change your mindset, and craft a better, though still realistic, narrative of what can be accomplished.

## 2. Social Connections

### **Most articles on resilience list social support networks as key.**

We turn to family, friends and colleagues as we navigate the vicissitudes of life.

In her article, “A Lawyer, a Volleyball and Global Pandemic,” author and attorney Luanda D. Gardner, makes reference to the Tom Hanks movie, *Cast Away*. “Connecting with people is so crucial to our survival that we empathize completely with Hanks’ character who anthropomorphizes a volleyball into his silent, steadfast friend while stranded on a deserted island. Our brains and bodies effervesce with neurotransmitters and hormones such as dopamine and oxytocin that are part of the complex neurochemistry

triggered by the hug of a dear friend, giggling with a child or cheering with other football fans as the Philadelphia Eagles win the Super Bowl.”

Cultivating strong ties with others is associated with reduced mental and physical health problems. Positive social support reinforces our sense of belonging, and feeling safe and secure. The fundamental need of being understood and accepted is met. Research has shown that people who have strong connections with others are more resistant to strains, happier in their work and often view their network as a source of comfort and encouragement.

By contrast, social isolation is associated with high levels of stress and depression.

Chronic stress results in the release of cortisol, the stress hormone. Overexposure to stress disrupts almost all of our body’s processes, including the immune system, the digestive and reproductive systems, and growth. Prolonged and chronic stress levels can make people more susceptible to mood disturbances, heart disease, sleep problems and memory and concentration impairment.

Whether social support offers organizational resilience in the form of information sharing, resource exchange or work collaboration, or personal resilience boosted by empathic and understanding friends, trusting

and compassionate relationships, and deep connections to others, people who sustain a strong social network tend to tolerate adversity better and more easily adapt to change.

## 3. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the conviction that you can produce results in your life, are able to motivate yourself, and have the cognitive and emotional resources to solve the problems that confront you.

### **Self-doubt can cause us to give up, or settle for less.**

Developing self-confidence involves acknowledging your successes, even the small wins. Also, when we observe others in action we may conclude that we have the same capabilities. Finally, finding a mentor who can teach and encourage is another advantage on the way to developing self-efficacy.

### **A note about conflict resolution:**

Interestingly, the same characteristics that make us resilient can translate to success in settling cases. Being optimistic is key to successful negotiation. It helps us stay positive, generate options and find solutions. The relationship between counsel can either help or hinder a successful resolution. Staying active in the legal community, building an excellent reputation

among your peers, and connecting with adversaries so that there is trust and respect, enhances the joy of practicing law and serves clients well. Finally, success in any negotiation can be increased by self-efficacy. Be persistent. Stay curious and engaged. Work hard and thoroughly prepare. Finding resolutions are served by these skills. ■

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