

## Personal Resilience

With discussions about mental health being encouraged and normalized, there is increasing interest in the concept of resilience. It's not something that's new, as people have always thrived on their ability to function during or after adversity. What does seem to be new is the acknowledgement of the potential societal benefits of resilience for wellness and productivity, and the fact that it can be developed. Resilience is not something that you have or do not have. You can increase your ability to thrive in periods of high stress, reduce the risk of becoming overwhelmed, and recover from catastrophic life events.

Imagine that your resilience is a four-legged table with one leg each corresponding to our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. Also integral to the structure is the tabletop, which connects everything and makes the table functional. It's analogous to our social network and support, which ties together our other health dimensions through good times and bad times. And with a four-legged table if one of those legs is short, weak, or even missing, the table will stand until the right amount of pressure is applied on the right place, then the table will tip or even fall over. That is what happens when we are stressed. Our resilience is tied to how well we built up the five elements of our humanity: mental, emotional, physical, spiritual and social.



Figure 1. The four-legged table of resilience.

## What is Resilience?

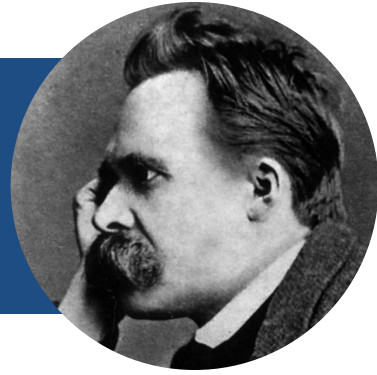
Of the many concepts and definitions pertaining to resilience, the one that we have adopted is:

**The ability to persist in the face of challenges and to bounce back from adversity.<sup>1</sup>**

While a definition is important, it's simply the starting point for understanding resilience. What needs to be understood is that resilience is not a static state, it's a journey. We all have ups and downs. Some of them are just a bad day, some are life-changing moments, and some are arduous periods of constant and diverse types of stress. Success in life is learning to struggle well. That means being resilient.

**"To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering."**

**-Frederich Nietzsche**



We respect resilient people for good reason: they give us hope that it's possible for any of us to withstand life's challenges. This is not false hope, as we do have the capacity to be individually resilient. However, it's also important to be aware that we can be more resilient with social support. People who are icons of strength often credit their successes to those closest to them, the people who believe in them. We should not think of resilience as something that is a defining characteristic, something that we do or do not have. We transition through states of wellness and performance throughout our lives, and the conditions around us are as important as our own determination. We will look at the broader perspective of resilience shortly, but for now let's focus on what we're talking about with the ups and down.

The graph below (Figure 2) shows example life courses of two people, A and B.<sup>2</sup> I think everyone would agree that we are striving to have the resilience of person A, who is someone that has bounced back from adversities. The charted line for Person A is a realistic view of our levels of reserve throughout life. There are certainly responses to adverse life events; no one goes through life experiencing perfect wellness. As is seen with Person A, we can recover from our setbacks with the right tools and support, most of which do not require expert or medical intervention. In fact, our adverse life events are experiences that can even lead to personal growth. As onerous as these events are, it is possible to emerge stronger.

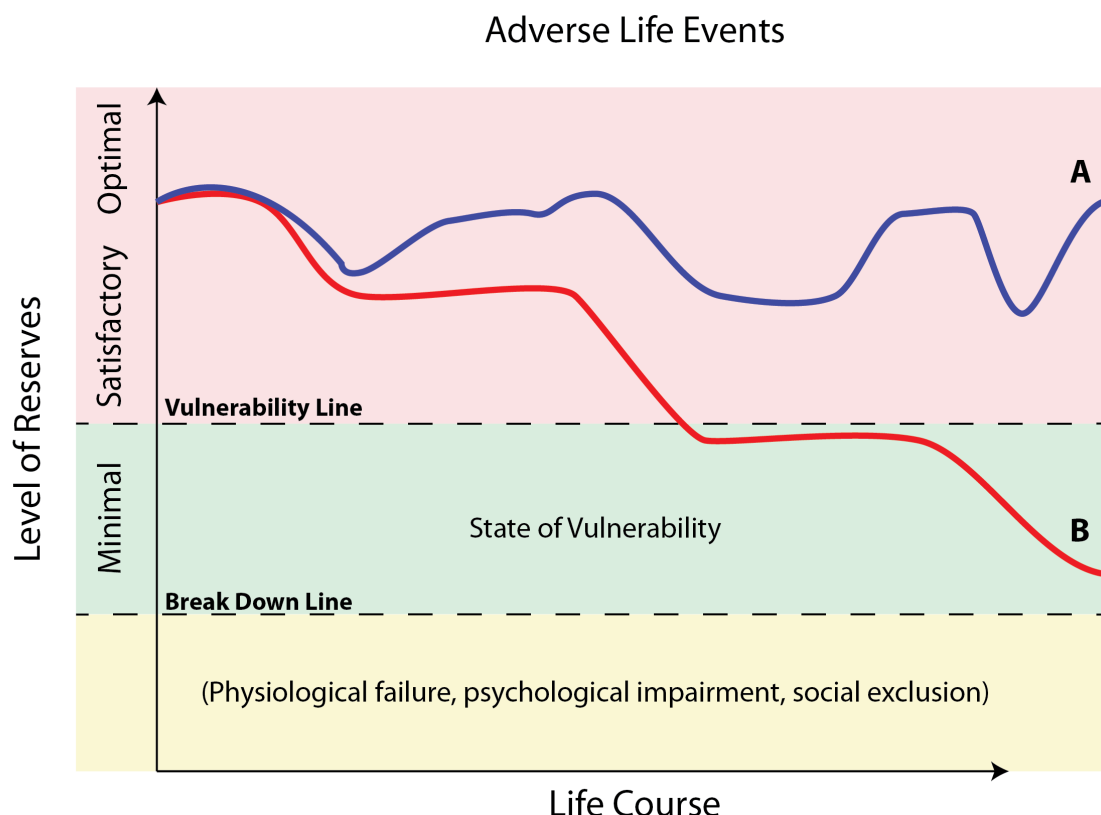


Figure 2. Personal resilience throughout life events.

Person B might be experiencing different life events that would explain their declining level of reserves as compared to Person A, but for this example let's assume that they are the same events. Even if their adverse life events are the same, which is not something that happens in the real world (i.e., same event, same time in life, etc.), there are many reasons why Person B's experience could be so different. This is what makes resilience such an interesting, challenging, and important subject. Sometimes our responses are ups and downs that could last hours or days, and other times there is insufficient recovery or continued decline in our reserves. The rest of this paper is going to explore the many external and internal factors that affect our resilience. The good news for Person B is that they can recover, and with the right tools and support they can have a life course that maintains a high level of reserves.

## External Factor Affecting Resilience

Let's return to the four-legged table for a moment. Before discussing how to keep the table in good shape, we'll first take a few moments to look at what puts stress on the table. These external stressors, the pressures on people, are the things happening in our environment. From a wellness perspective, these external forces are best described in terms of the social determinants of health.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3. External pressures acting on the four-legged table. An analogy for external factors (social determinants of health) affecting personal health and resilience.

The world around us affects our health. This should come as no surprise, as most of us realize that things like pollution and poor nutrition directly affect us. However, the list of external health influences is much longer than the things that we inhale or ingest. The stresses of physical, emotional, and financial insecurity can have devastating impacts on our psychological well-being and result in actual illness. The ability to escape from conditions of insecurity is reliant on viable and stable work conditions, education, or both. These social determinants of health can be a reinforcing loop, sometimes positively and sometimes in a negative way. For example, someone who starts life in poverty often does not have access to decent quality health services

and is unlikely to be able to afford a college or university education. They might not even complete high school and could become stuck in a cycle of job insecurity. Compared to someone who is born into an environment of financial stability, you can see that they are living very different lives. The health consequences can be described using Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



Figure 4. Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Basically, Maslow's theory states that each level must be satisfied before progressing to the next one.<sup>4</sup> Although research has indicated that each level is not as distinct as depicted, it has stood up reasonably to modern research and is useful for understanding needs and stressors. As you can see, our internal needs are often satisfied by external influences. Therefore, it stands to reason that our world affects our health. In the debate about nature versus nurture, there is undoubtedly a large element of nurture, and that impacts our health and resilience.

## Internal Factors Affecting Resilience

The good news is that we are able to influence our own wellness. We can be more resilient through our own thoughts and actions, which enables us to achieve balance, productivity, optimism, longevity, and fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> In this section we will look at how the brain works, then examine each of the four legs of the table (mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health), and finish by discussing the tabletop (social health).

## How The Brain Works

Let's begin by looking at the central role that the mind has in our bodily functions and perception of the world. Think of the brain as the conductor of an orchestra. At its best, it's a passionate maestro that can produce something truly amazing. When working effectively, the conductor feels the music, anticipates accurately, and senses the audience's engagement. Like the maestro, the brain needs to be attuned to inputs from the world and the signals that it's receiving from the body. This might sound simple since we process inputs all the time without thinking about it. However, the brain, the nervous system, and the systems throughout the body are incredibly complex; too complex to describe in detail here, so we will focus on a few key points about brain function:

- The brain controls basic functions, such as breathing, movement, and even digestion. It uses feedback from the body to unconsciously regulate them effectively, and there are also conscious signals from the brain as the conductor.<sup>6</sup> This means we have some ability to cognitively regulate some of our systems, which is why activities like breathing exercises are possible.<sup>7</sup>
- The brain detects threats. Our senses feed into our brain and it assimilates the inputs to make sense of what's going on around us. When a threat is detected, it causes intuitive reactions: confront the threat (fight), run away (flight), or attempt to be undetected (freeze).<sup>8</sup> The fight/flight/freeze response, also known as the fight-or-flight response, served us very well throughout most of our existence when predators were trying to kill us, and the ability to detect threats continues to serve us well in some circumstances today. What's important to understand here is that the brain is looking for problems. There is an element of negativity programmed into us, which is something that we need to understand about ourselves to ensure that it doesn't take control. The significance of this will become apparent as we consider the dimensions of health.
- Emotions reside in the brain, even if we feel them elsewhere. Assignment of an emotion to what our body feels is a brain function, which indicates that there is an interpretation occurring. Therefore despite having such strong power for reasoning, we make most of our decisions based on emotions.<sup>9</sup>
- We are wired to make quick judgments and decisions.<sup>10</sup> That suited us well for survival, as just discussed, but it does not serve us well in a world that is increasingly complex, especially considering that we make most decisions emotionally rather than logically. The implication of this is that our perception is an interpretation of our world. What we see and how we feel about it might be based on fact, but our reactions are our own internal processing.

We are now ready to discuss the parts of the table, which represent the five dimensions of health: mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social. We will go through them in that order, however in the real world they are not compartmented so neatly. There is a tremendous amount of overlap, which should become evident by the end of the paper.

## Mental Health

Much of our mental health is dependent upon perception. As was just discussed, our brains default to snap judgments and decisions in most situations, we naturally see problems more easily than finding goodness, and emotions are an integral part of our decision-making. Basically, there are flaws in our design, hence the saying, "to err is human."<sup>11</sup> So our beautifully complex system is not perfect, even at the best of times. However, understanding these inherent flaws should lead us to understand why there are different points of view. This is powerful for our ability to be compassionate towards others (to be discussed further in social health) and to help us adjust our own perspectives.

**"If you change the way you look at things,  
the things you look at change."**

**-Wayne Dyer**





We have the capacity to attend to the stress we are putting on our brains by shifting perspectives, and this shift in perspective can even be helpful when we need to work our way out of extreme depletion of reserves. Both Person A and B in the chart above can benefit from understanding perspective; however, Person B is approaching or is in crisis, so let's consider that in more detail.

What happens in a crisis? According to the psychologist Jordan Peterson, complexity is the fundamental problem in mental illness.<sup>12</sup> When one incident occurs, it can be overwhelming, but we can generally deal with isolated events. However, when multiple crises occur in someone's life, when all of their needs are suddenly unfulfilled, he says that the brain is like a balloon that bursts at the weakest point. Whatever predisposition we might have had would be exposed, and people do indeed experience crumbling setbacks such as losing a loved one, their job, their financial security, and their purpose all at about the same time. We often talk about a work life and a home life, but understand this: we only have one life, so all stresses build up in our one body. Therefore, it should be obvious that people will react differently to one stressor. It's only one incident, which might be of little significance to one person while adding to the massive burdens of another, such as Person B in our example. We can't solve mental health in this paper, but in reference to resilience we can offer that there is protection from attending to your cognitive reserve.

A large part of the "level of reserves" that is in the graph is cognitive reserve. A brilliant but unpublished psychiatrist describes overthinking as leaving a chainsaw on full-throttle and just going back to pour gas into it every once in a while. It is doing nothing but consuming a ridiculous amount of energy. Jordan Peterson says, "overthinking things is like sawing off the limb that you're sitting on." We have the capacity for rational thought, but we cannot process every global factor that influences an event or decision. Despite strong cognitive abilities, our brains are still better at dealing with immediate threats and rewards. So, you need to give your brain a break, and more importantly, you need to give yourself permission to do so.<sup>13</sup> Figure 5 provides a way of looking at scheduling your brain activity. You should think about spending time in each quadrant every day, and then plan time for dedicated brain breaks on a longer cycle, such as weekly opportunities to recharge the brain and how to effectively use your holiday time. The caveat to using this chart: don't overthink it! Simply consider whether or not you are adequately cycling through the quadrants, as some are more appealing than others. In particular, the "high thinking—high doing" realm gives a sense of accomplishment and tends to get praise from bosses; it can be addictive, but it's also the burn-out zone.

Level of Thinking	<b>High Thinking – Low Doing</b>	<b>High Thinking – High Doing</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning &amp; Strategic thinking</li> <li>• Studying</li> <li>• Reading, learning (including audiobooks &amp; podcasts)</li> <li>• Helping your kids with homework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working</li> <li>• Dealing with the hard emails</li> <li>• Reconciling finances</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Chairing a meeting</li> <li>• Presentations</li> </ul>
	<b>Low Thinking – Low Doing</b>	<b>Low Thinking – High Doing</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindfulness &amp; meditation</li> <li>• Watching a movie or a show</li> <li>• Listening to music</li> <li>• Spending time with family &amp; friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical activity</li> <li>• Hobbies / "Flow"</li> <li>• Cleaning up</li> <li>• Organizing correspondence</li> <li>• Playing with your kids</li> </ul>

Level of Doing

Figure 5. Brain activity chart: building cognitive reserve through scheduling of changes.

## Emotional Health

Emotions are at our core. We form relationships, make decisions, and seek fulfillment through emotions. You'll recall from the previous discussion on brain function that emotions are formed from sensory inputs. Our past experiences are also integrated when we try to make sense of something. The integration of inputs and experiences leads to snap judgments that form the basis of our decisions. These rapid brain processes always make us feel something. In a world of increasing sensory inputs, faster moving and constant news cycles, digital connection and distractions, and complexity, we are subjecting ourselves to a flood of emotions. Our brains are working non-stop to process the inputs and make judgments, which leads to the depletion of our reserves from emotional overload. Add the stressors of the world into the equation and it becomes obvious why many people are on edge: we are running at full capacity and thinking that we can manage it. We are seeking ways to get through it and find a sense of happiness that is advertised as attainable.

What we need to recognise is that perpetual happiness is not achievable, even if others give that appearance through their social media feeds. What we are seeking is to be content and fulfilled in our lives, and we should embrace the idea of experiencing all emotions. Not only is it necessary to experience sadness in order to appreciate happiness, it's not physiologically possible to be perpetually happy. This is because there is a neural adaptation when a constant signal occurs.<sup>14</sup> The brain will numb to that signal and need more input to feel the same level of happiness if we don't give ourselves a mental break and embrace feeling all emotions. With sensemaking and perception occurring in our brains we have the opportunity to adapt our emotions, as long as we accept that we are innately driven by emotions. Part of this control over our emotions goes back to ensuring that we have cognitive reserve, as was discussed above, and that we attend to our other health needs.

## Physical Health

Activity, nutrition, and sleep are crucial through good and bad times. Activity creates cognitive reserve, it promotes brain health, and it's something that our bodies truly need. It's not just about the physical health implications, such as heart wellness. Activity can also directly contribute to the other dimensions of health. It can change your perspective (mental and spiritual), help regulate your mood (emotional and mental), and promote human interaction (social and emotional). As for nutrition, there is so much truth to the saying, "you are what you eat." Your nutrition has many immediate and long term consequences and like consistent activity, it can be the first thing that we ignore when in crisis; the moment that you need it most. Turning to sleep, your body needs to re-energize and your brain needs to process the day's events. This only occurs effectively if a full sleep cycle is achieved. For those who say, "I can sleep when I'm dead," that day is probably coming sooner because of their approach. When we cannot cycle through the phases of sleep, hitting the REM phase in particular, we don't give our bodies and minds the restorative opportunity it desperately needs. And for our emotions, the saying, "time heals all wounds" would be more accurate if sleep were substituted for time. Every animal sleeps, even though there are constant threats to their lives. We have not evolved out of this need.

Ultimately, you don't have to train at the level of an elite athlete, eat like a nutritionist, or go into periods of hibernation. You simply need a good routine that allows you to achieve the necessary outputs in life while recognizing that you cannot sprint all day, every day. You and everyone around you deserve the benefits of physical health.

## Spiritual Health

Think of spiritual health as your purpose. While for some people it includes religion, it is more than this. Essentially, we all have something to contribute to this world, and that needs to also align with what has meaning for us.<sup>15</sup> A few people in the world will rise to notoriety and even greatness in life, but that's not necessary to fulfill a purpose. Whether you are solving the greatest scientific problem of our day or being a caregiver, your purpose is yours and it's worth taking a pause sometimes to put things in perspective.<sup>16</sup> For example, we talked about brain function, so it's worth considering the magnificence of a system containing

billions of cells and infinite connections and that it works so optimally. And even pondering the immensity of the universe and probability of having been born helps us appreciate beauty and magnificence beyond us; we have a lot of answers about our natural world and there is so much that we still don't know. It's liberating and humbling to be grateful for what we have and who we are, to express compassion and understanding to others, and to accept that there's still so much more to learn.

This kind of gratitude and perspective allows us to stop overthinking, achieve good physical health, and embrace diverse emotions. It also provides a strong foundation for us to make substantive connections with others and achieve good social health, which is absolutely crucial for complete wellness.

## **Social Health**

So you might be wondering, "if the brain is so important, why is social health the tabletop that holds everything together?" Remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the fact that physical needs must be met before the social stuff? Interestingly, this is where more modern research reveals that need fulfillment is not as rigid as Maslow predicted.<sup>17</sup> While the concept is not entirely wrong, it has been found that people can better withstand hunger, threats to their lives, and poor living conditions when there is human comfort and love. Additionally, there is research that has been ongoing for over eighty years to indicate that the most fulfilled people are the ones who formed the deepest relationships, not the people who had the most accomplishments in life.<sup>18 19</sup> Whereas the social determinants of health discussed earlier describe how our environment affects us, the social health dimension examines how we interact with society. This is about the fact that we have needs that can only be fulfilled through human interaction and those connections are at the core of being a resilient person.<sup>20</sup> Our social health is built on a network of human connections, and it's also the health dimension that connects other dimensions together: our perception of our place in the world is connected to mental and spiritual dimensions, and these in turn affect our emotions and our physical well-being.

## **Bringing It All Together**

Ultimately, you need to attend to all parts of your four-legged table. For your mental health, remember that perspective is powerful. We discussed how our sensory inputs mesh with our experiences to make judgments about our environment. Although we have little control over the external factors affecting our wellness, we can shift how we interpret the inputs. Rather than asking yourself in hard times "why me?" you can ask yourself "why not me?" It's inevitable that we will be down at times. That is human nature, and there are many adverse life events that will erode our level of reserves. That is why it is so important to take care of your emotional health and recognize its incredible connection to mental health. Taking a moment to recognize that your brain can default to negativity and that you can reframe that perspective is immensely helpful. A big part of balanced health is giving your body what it needs, which means attending to your physical health through activity, good food, and proper rest. Your body will thank you for these efforts, and we have learned that your brain will really thank you for it. All of these things allow you to seek your purpose in life, and this spiritual fulfillment is key to building the meaningful human connections that are so crucial to our resilience.

I was asked one time, "what's the one thing that you would tell someone about improving their resilience?" I was new to this and it caught me by surprise, especially since it was such an obvious question that I ought to have considered. My response, and I still stand by it: invest in people because we are deeply social creatures who need human interaction in the best of times, loving support in the worst of times, and only find lifetime fulfillment through caring relationships. Your health is not a fixed state and your resilience is life's journey. If you remember this, you will be able to contribute more meaningfully to your closest relationships and build greater trust through compassion in the workplace.



The four-legged table is an analogy that allows you to consider the components of your health, which is very important in your journey to find balance. If you want to consider an image of resilience as a whole, think about the tree that is subjected to heavy winds. It bends, often to extraordinary lengths, but can then return to its normal state, resume its functions, and even continue to grow. Some days will be hard, and there are adverse life events that will push you to your breaking point. With preparation and social support, you can withstand these storms and learn to thrive once again.



Figure 6. Resilience in action. A tree can bend in the wind, return to its natural state, heal, and continue to grow.

## Endnotes

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