

New Zealand Defence Force

Everyday Resilience

A Practical Guide to Increasing Performance

Produced by NZDF Psychology and NZDF Health

An Insider's Look at Resilience – Increasing Your Own Sources of Strength

Resilience means being able to bounce back from challenges that life throws at you. It doesn't mean being unrealistically happy and trouble free all of the time. We can think of a resilient person as being like a spring...they can bend and stretch and get a bit bent out of shape but eventually they spring back to shape and continue to function as they normally would, in contrast other structures are more prone to breaking when placed under stress (like a twig). Resilient people are able to thrive in spite of conditions that are difficult and they are able to recognise what things they can control. Resilient people also make the best use of the resources they have knowing that life is often not perfect.

What does resilience look like and how do we know when we are resilient?

- ✓ The demands we face are challenging rather than demoralising
- ✓ Our health is generally good
- ✓ We have healthy habits and good social connections
- ✓ We can identify and use all of our resources to help us stay strong

Resilience is about taking action to manage whatever life throws at us.

Surprisingly it is often small actions that can produce a big upturn in our quality of life. This booklet will guide you through some simple, practical actions that you can take to improve resilience and improve performance.

In order to manage our resilience it's important that we pay attention to what is helping us to be resilient and what is hindering our resilience. The exercise over the page (the Bucket Model) is a good place to start to take stock of your levels of resilience.

Think of your resilience as being like a bucket of water. The water is resilience but the bucket has holes that drain this resilience away. This exercise gets you to identify what those holes are and how you might plug them and how you might top up the resilience levels.

A large body of research tells us that there are some very effective ways to fill your bucket with resilience. Try some of the following tips...Some of them are things we think of as common sense but we also tend to underestimate just how effective they are. These things include...

- ✓ **Physical exercise** – exercise has been shown to make positive changes to the brain that help people to deal with stress. It also has the benefit of making you healthier.

- ✓ **Diet** – eating a healthy and balanced diet helps to give you physical resilience but can also help with mood.

- ✓ **Sleep** – getting the right amount of sleep is important in being able to deal with stress. Being tired is one of the fastest ways to reduce your ability to deal with challenges. Getting enough sleep also helps you operate at peak performance.

- ✓ **Relaxation** – getting a chance to unwind and relax is very important. There are many ways to do this, playing sports, doing yoga, reading, or simply doing nothing every now and then.

- ✓ **Social support** – having people to rely on and talk to is important for well-being, put time into those relationships, be a good friend yourself and people will be there for you during tough times. Focusing on others is good for our own wellbeing.

- ✓ **Being optimistic** – For some reason humans are hard-wired to notice the bad stuff and pay more attention to it than the good stuff. Sometimes we need to shift this balance so that we recognise and all the good stuff that is happening that we don't always pay attention to. A simple exercise that you can do is called **three good things**. A couple of times a week pay some attention to what is going well or what you are grateful for. This can be as simple as work finishing early one day or winning a prize through to getting some good feedback on your performance.

ACTION POINTS

What sources of resilience do you already have?

What additional things will you start doing to increase your resilience?

Bouncing Back: Finding the positives in failure

Your Mind-Set and Set-Backs

The questionnaire below will give you some useful information about your mind-set and how that impacts your resilience and your performance.

Read the statements below and indicate in the column on the right whether you agree or disagree with them. Don't think too hard about the answer; just circle the one that feels right to you.

		Circle One
1	You are born with a fixed amount of natural ability	Agree/Disagree
2	Good preparation before performing a task is a way to develop your ability	Agree/Disagree
3	Good performance on a task is a way of showing others that you have natural ability	Agree/Disagree
4	Performing a task successfully can help develop your ability	Agree/Disagree
5	You have a certain amount of ability and you cannot do much to change it	Agree/Disagree
6	You can improve and develop your ability if you really try	Agree/Disagree
7	If you fail in a task, you question your ability	Agree/Disagree
8	When you learn new skills, your basic ability improves	Agree/Disagree
9	When you have to exert a lot of effort, you show that you do not have natural ability	Agree/Disagree
10	The effort you exert impacts your ability	Agree/Disagree
11	Difficulties and challenges prevent you from developing your natural ability	Agree/Disagree
12	If you fail in a task, you still trust your ability	Agree/Disagree
13	Your performance is determined by your ability	Agree/Disagree
14	Criticism from others can help develop your ability	Agree/Disagree

To score...

Count the number of times you agreed for odd numbers

Odd number score



Count the number of times you agreed for even numbers

Even number score



A higher odd number score indicates a **Fixed Mind-set**

A higher even number score indicates a **Growth Mind-set**

This test is designed to determine whether you tend to believe your ability is fixed and can't be changed or whether it is malleable or changeable. People who believe their ability is fixed have a **'fixed mind-set'** and people who believe their ability can be changed have a **'growth mind-set'**.

Why is this important? Over the years psychologists have discovered that these beliefs about ability and performance and learning orientations have large consequences for learning as well as resilience.

Fixed Mind-set

*When people believe that their ability is **fixed** they tend to find performance (and especially assessment) situations more stressful.*

This is because they believe that the *outcome* of learning is most important as it indicates to everyone how good they are. These people tend to believe that people are inherently either good or bad at things (rather than average). Have you ever heard or even said things like "I'm just not a maths person" or "people are either arts or science people" or "she's a natural at that?" Interestingly, people who have had some good performance in the past are particularly vulnerable to this. Why? Because, they are often praised for being "smart" rather than being praised for putting in effort. Focusing on being smart produces a fixed mind-set because it involves being focused on the outcome of learning rather than the process.

The consequences!

As a result people with a fixed mind-set prefer not to invest too much effort in things that they find difficult and will tend to give up on difficult things for things they are naturally better at, rather than persist with difficult challenges. They may not enjoy the process of learning and if they do fail at something or, make a mistake, they take it quite hard because they believe that that failure tells them something about them as a person.

Growth Mind-set

In contrast, people who believe that their ability is changeable tend to believe they can achieve anything they put their mind to...so long as they put in effort. They are concerned with growth rather than outcome. Natural ability isn't as important to them as effort is. They know that at any point some people will show better performance than others at some things but they believe we can all improve and develop. This means that if they fail or have a setback, it doesn't mean they can't do something...it just means that they can't do it **yet**...and it just tells them where they need to direct more effort. And so, they persist for longer and are interested in the journey of learning rather than just the outcome. For them mistakes are just parts of learning.

Changing your beliefs about your ability

Now the good news....these beliefs are very easy to change! It's extremely common to have a fixed mind-set but it's also easy to change to a growth mind-set. The trick is to listen *carefully* to what you are telling yourself when you find yourself experiencing a challenge or setback.

Changing your mind-set

Think of a task or a situation you find difficult or challenging and fill in where you are on the scale for the following three items (put a star or cross on the scale somewhere from never, sometimes and often).

When thinking about this task how often do you hear yourself thinking...I can't do this?

- *Instead try telling yourself "I cant do this **yet**"*

How often do you hear yourself thinking....I'm no good at this?....

- *Try teling yourself...I can **become better** at this*

After completing a challenging task , how often do you hear yourself thinking...was I any good?

- *Instead try focusing on what can I do to improve?*

The Thoughts We Think

I want you to think of a situation in which you made a mistake, performed poorly, gave up on something mid-way through or failed.

In the space below write down the things you were saying to yourself in that situation.

Examples of situations might be – failing an exam, upsetting a friend or forgetting something important.

Notice what you are telling yourself and ask, “would I say that to a friend?” or, “would I say that to a young child?” Often we are much harsher with ourselves than we are with others. Noticing when we talk to ourselves like this and stopping it is important.

Finding the positives in setbacks:

Here are some more tips to think about failure differently...

- Favourite failure exercise: Think of a time that you failed at something; it could be a sports or academic setback for example. What valuable information did that failure give you about how you needed to improve?
-
-
-

Learning from others

A great way to learn is to learn from others experiences, both their successes and failures contain important information that you can apply.

Consider what other people have had failures before they had success...do the All Blacks or silver Ferns win every single time?

Ask successful people you know about setbacks they have recovered from, they have often developed useful strategies as a result of their experience.

Summary:

Your beliefs about your ability impact both your performance and how much you enjoy learning. Having the belief that your ability can be changed with effort makes you more resilient in the face of setbacks because setbacks are just information about where you need to put in some more effort.

ACTION POINTS

Do my beliefs about my ability hold me back?

What will be less stressful if I were to believe that my ability can be changed?

Managing Nerves to increase performance

Often we refer to pressure as stress. Stress is not all bad, it can be helpful, it can make us run fast to get out of trouble or it can be unhelpful when it can hinder our performance by taking up mental capacity and taking away from our enjoyment of activities.

What do we mean by mental capacity? We could also call it “brain space”. We have a certain amount of space in our brain to deal with whatever is happening right now. The more difficult something is or if we don’t have a lot of experience with doing it, the more brain space we need. What sort of things can influence how much brain space we have?

- ✓ If we have learnt something so well that its automatic it doesn’t take up brain space (e.g. walking).
- ✓ If we are doing something new it takes up *lots* of brain space.
- ✓ If we are stressed about doing something that also takes up a lot of space.
- ✓ We need a certain amount of capacity to do a task and when we are stressed we have less capacity to perform well.

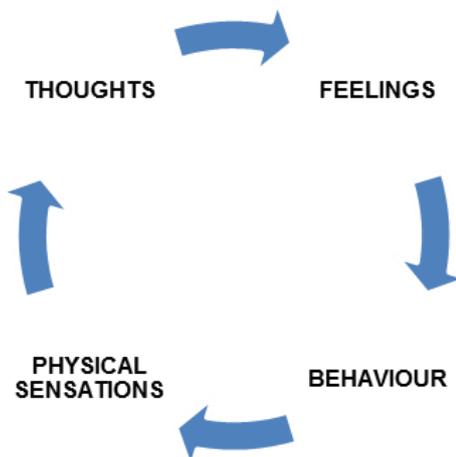
What makes us stressed when doing a task? Usually its due to the possibility of being assessed or judged in some way or if something important is at stake.

What do you think that stress does to your performance? You might experience things like...

- ✓ Mind blanks
- ✓ Poor coordination
- ✓ Errors or mistakes

So that we can manage the stress and increase our brain space it’s good to learn a bit about how stress works.

We can think of stress or nerves as being made up of four components...



Thoughts

The first one we will cover is thoughts. Often people think that the stressful situation is what is causing stress but actually, it's often their thoughts.

Thoughts can be fleeting things that we don't pay much attention to but they have a strong influence on the other aspects of this cycle.

You will find that some of the thoughts you are having are quite negative and some will be more positive. This depends on whether you perceive the demand or task as a **challenge** or a **threat**.

Some examples of challenge thoughts are:

"This will be tricky but I've had loads of practice"

"I love a challenge"

Some examples of threat thoughts are:

"What if I look like an idiot?"

"It would be horrible if I failed"

Feelings

Thoughts then influence feelings. These can be harder to describe as they are a bit less concrete but typical feelings associated with threat thoughts are anxiety, fear, a sense of impending doom, being restless or just uncomfortable. Feelings that are associated with challenge might be excitement or anticipation.

Physical sensations

Thoughts and feeling also contribute to physical sensations. If you are having threat thoughts this might feel like the jitters, adrenaline, shaking, sweating etc. If you are having challenge thoughts the physical sensations might actually be the same – its just that you are interpreting them differently.

Behaviour

Then we have behaviours: Stress and pressure can make us 'do stuff differently'. This might be things like getting angry with people, avoiding the problem; escaping or alternatively, it might mean working even harder, or seeking support. Some behaviour will be helpful to us and some won't be helpful. If we choose behaviour that is not helpful it makes the thoughts and feelings even worse and so continues the cycle of stress. Changing what we do in response to stress can change how we experience it. Ask yourself what small thing could I do differently that might make a difference?

If you feel stressed when doing a task or assessment it's good to be able to call on a couple of quick strategies to manage this and keep your performance on track.

Two strategies to interrupt the cycle of stress...

The first strategy is to **change our thoughts**. If you are having threat thoughts like "*I'm going to fail*" or "*this is terrible*" ask yourself the following questions...

- ✓ Is this thought helping me be resilient?
- ✓ What other ways can I look at this situation?
- ✓ Will this thought be an issue in one week? Or, in 3 months?

Manage physical sensations

The second strategy to break the cycle is to change the physical sensations by relaxing.

One way of relaxing quickly is to do some **tactical breathing**. Tactical breathing has the uncanny ability to stop the physical stress reaction in its tracks. It swiftly slows down the heart rate and allows the body to relax. When we are stressed we tend to breathe quickly and shallowly, through our chest and often, through our mouths...that's great if we need to run away quickly but not so great with everyday demands. Breathing quickly and shallowly can mess up the ratio of oxygen to co2 in the body which increases feelings of anxiety.

Breathing tactically is a skill which must be practiced regularly for it to become a habit. Practice it at regular times when you are not stressed and you will soon be able to use this when you need it. Try it when you are waiting in a queue, at the traffic lights, in ad breaks.

Practice tactical breathing

1. Slow your breathing down
2. Lengthen your breath – inhale through the nose to a count of 4, exhale to a count of 4
3. Fill your belly with air when you breathe in (diaphragmatic breathing)
4. Do this for four minutes

The benefit of this tool is that it works quickly and you can do this anywhere.

When would you use this? Any time you want to induce a relaxation response but it is particularly effective when nerves are interfering with your physical performance such as during sports or a musical performance. Tactical breathing in this case can slow the heart rate, make your hands steadier and improve your performance.

There are also some good apps that can help you practice this (Breathe2Relax and tactical breather).

ACTION POINTS

Everyone has situations in which they typically feel more pressure. Identifying these situations and applying the tactical breathing skills will assist in making you more relaxed. Tactical breathing skills need to be practiced regularly for them to have the most effect, simply knowing about them is not enough...you have to actually use them.

It might be helpful to list all of the situations that you know you have a tendency to feel physically nervous about and commit to applying your tactical breathing and thought changing skills to these situations when they next occur. Below is a sample list of situations that commonly provoke the experience of nervousness, butterflies, racing heart or other physical symptoms of stress.

- ✓ Public speaking
- ✓ Sports performances
- ✓ Exams or tests
- ✓ Interviews
- ✓ Weapons training
- ✓ Fitness tests

Next time you are in one of these situations try tactical breathing first and then tackle the thoughts.....

List the thoughts that you have about one of these situations

Thoughts:.....
.....

Now, challenge those thoughts!

✓ Is this thought helping me to be resilient?Yes/No

✓ What other ways can I look at this situation?.....
.....

✓ Will this thought be an issue in one week or one month?..... Yes/No

Healthy Habits: Fuelling mind and body

One of the most effective ways to become resilient is to put in place healthy habits...

One of the key messages about healthy habits is “keep it simple”. Often, when we are at our least resilient, it is because life has become very complicated and demanding. Rather than use a complicated solution, that is hard to implement, one of the best ways to get back on track is to focus on the basics, sleep, a balanced diet, exercise, relaxation. In other words we need to develop *healthy habits*.

What happens if we don't? Essentially we won't be operating at our best. Healthy habits are important for peak performance. If our lifestyle is unhealthy for too long then...

- ✓ Performance suffers
- ✓ Wellbeing suffers
- ✓ Health suffers
- ✓ Mood suffers

GOALS are not enough!

Often when we want to change our behaviour or our habits we set goals. But there is a catch with goals....while they give us an end state to work towards (which is important)...what we also need are **strategies** to get there. How many people who say they have made a new year's resolution are able to sustain it over the long term? The answer is very few, and that is because, although they had a goal in mind, they actually needed to focus on the process of obtaining the goal rather than the outcome. Below are two different strategies that you could try to help maintain healthy habits. Try them and see which one works for you.

Strategy One – Good planning

We can have the best intentions to change our behaviour to increase our activity level but without good planning we know that people don't tend to actually make the right changes or maintain them for very long...this is why new years resolutions don't tend to stick even when people are fairly motivated to make changes.

Effective planning for behaviour change takes two steps

1. **Action planning** – deciding when, where, how you will become healthier
2. **Coping planning** – anticipating what barriers will stop you from continuing to become healthy and putting in place strategies to get over those barriers

<p>EXAMPLE ACTION PLAN</p>	<p>I WILL... <i>walk to and from work instead of driving four times per week</i></p>
<p>Coping Plan</p>	
<p>Barrier 1 and what I will do to cope with it...</p>	<p><i>Poor weather - get some cold weather running gear</i></p>
<p>Barrier 2 and what I will do to cope with it...</p>	<p><i>Injury - if I feel an injury coming on I'll get it checked at the doctors and follow their instructions</i></p>
<p>Barrier 3 and what I will do to cope with it</p>	<p><i>Boredom - I'll put together a good MP3 song list to keep me entertained</i></p>

Now complete your own plan over the page...

Your plan....

ACTION PLAN	I WILL...
Coping Plan	
Barrier 1 and what I will do to cope with it...	
Barrier 2 and what I will do to cope with it...	
Barrier 3 and what I will do to cope with it	

Other strategies to improve habits

- ✓ Make small and sustainable changes to begin with – these are more likely to stick in the long term.
- ✓ Focus on improving your average over a week rather than focusing on just one day (e.g. Aim to improve average kilometres run per week or number of vegetables eaten).
- ✓ Identify what triggers you to perform a bad habit and replace it with a better alternative.
- ✓ Reward yourself for good behaviour or make the habit rewarding (e.g. listen to music you like while running).
- ✓ Make the desired behaviour easier to do (e.g packing gym bag the night before, having only healthy food in the house)

ACTION POINTS

What habits do I want to start, stop or improve?

Begin planning for how you will get there!