

Norcross MD Advocacy

Dr. William Norcross M.D.

How building Resilience can create better Working Lives for Physicians

Overview

One dictionary defines resilience as: *the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.* Adversity and difficulties are part of life; some are helpful and help us develop into strong human beings, but some difficulties are harmful. Some can be avoided, but many cannot.

We are likely born with some innate abilities to develop resilience, but certainly we can choose to develop elements of resilience, too.

The authors, one at the

beginning of life and a career as a health professional (MKT), the other at the end (WAN), hope that we can offer the reader some pathways to good health and strength through the development of resilience.

Borrowing on the work and insights of the writer and editor, Whitney Hople, we will explore the nature of stress and resilience through quotations from brilliant planetary co-travelers who have opined on this subject, and it seems wholly appropriate to begin with a summary by Ms. Hople herself.

“Stress is an unavoidable part of life. If we respond positively to stressful situations, we can learn and grow in ways that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. But too much stress can harm our well-being in many ways – from causing physical illness to overwhelming us mentally.” – Whitney Hople



“Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.” – Hans Selye (1907-1982)

Selye is considered the Father of Stress Research. Selye was the first to place the term “stress” into the mental health literature. The importance of this insight cannot be overestimated. Without defining stress and without observing and measuring stress, we would have no way to combat it. In recognizing that “adopting the right attitude” would be an important stepping stone to dealing with stress, he points out that the individual has some control of thoughts and feelings and seems to have anticipated cognitive behavioral therapy (CPT). Additionally, he importantly observed that some stress could be “positive:” beneficial in carving and molding stronger mental health.

“Happiness is a choice. You can choose to be happy. There’s going to be stress in life, but it’s your choice whether you let it affect you or not.” – Valerie Bertinelli

It is simple to read these three sentences by Ms. Bertinelli, but this is a very deep thought, easier to recite than to effect in life. Nonetheless, the best things in life require effort, and happiness should be in the forefront. The best way to approach this is to take a timeout and ask yourself: Am I happy? What would happiness look like for me? Sometimes these questions can best be approached with the help of a trusted friend or even a health professional or clergy.

“For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.” – Lily Tomlin

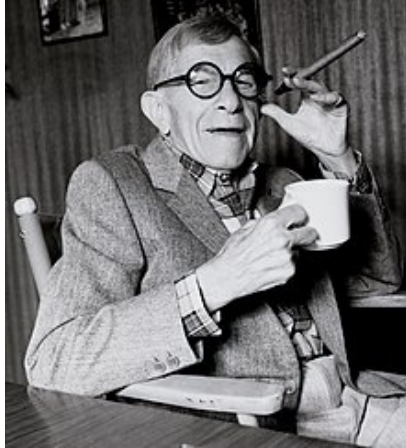
It turns out that some of the best advice on adversity and resilience comes not from scientists, but comedians and humorists. This should not be surprising. We have heard that laughter is the best medicine, and who can deny that a good laugh or chuckle makes us feel better? Humor does help us slow down, not take ourselves so seriously, and see the irony and perhaps even humor in a dark situation.

I have no idea what Ziggy Marley and Lee Iacocca have in common, but their observations on the matter at hand seem remarkably congruous:

“In times of great stress or adversity, it’s always best to keep busy, to plow your anger and your energy into something positive.” – Lee Iacocca

“Doing something that is productive is a great way to alleviate emotional stress. Get your mind doing something that is productive.” – Ziggy Marley

One caveat here: Remember that people who work themselves to death abide by this mantra, too. It is wise to listen to Oscar Wilde in this regard: “Moderation in all things, including moderation.”



We promised comedians, so here is one of the greatest, George Burns:

“If you ask what is the single most important key to longevity, I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension. And if you didn’t ask me, I’d still have to say it.” – George Burns

George, who lived to be 100, could not even talk about stress without joking about it! George also attributed much of his happiness to the love of his life, his wife, the comedian Gracie Allen. His book *Gracie*, is a treasure. Relationships are important.

“God will never give you anything you can’t handle, so don’t stress.” – Kelly Clarkson

Not everyone believes in God or participates in an organized religion, but almost everyone has spiritual values. Do not hesitate to rely on your spiritual values in your daily life and especially in times of need.



“Reduce the stress levels in your life through relaxation techniques like meditation, deep breathing, and exercise. You’ll look and feel way better for it.” – Suzanne Somers

Ms. Somers hit the nail on the head. Perhaps the most direct and accessible way to ameliorate stress and anxiety is through regular daily exercise. You do not have to run marathons. What is

important is that whatever exercise you choose, that you *like it*. If you like a form of exercise, you are much more likely to do it regularly. Carefully done studies show that routine housekeeping and yard work are significant sources of healthful exercise. Walking is great.

“Faced with stress, too many people feel they have nowhere to turn to, that they don’t have access to the kind of friendships or communities where they can easily and openly share their problems and worries.” – Daisaku Ikeda

Daisaku Ikeda is a 95 year-old Japanese Buddhist philosopher who is not well known in the United States, but has done much to advance world peace and nuclear disarmament. The point he makes is importantly salient. Modern civilization has resulted in the “suburbanization” of the Western World, enabling us to go through life with minimal in-person interactions: drive-through “fast” food, movies on video, religious services and much else on television, and of course, being able to access almost everything through Amazon. Advancing technology is not “bad,” of course, but the question that arises is whether the personal growth of individuals can keep pace sufficiently to remain healthy in a rapidly changing environment. We need to “be there” for each other.

The CDC tells us that the leading causes of death among persons age 14 to 25 in the United States are: 1) **accidental injuries**; 2) **suicide**; and 3) **homicide**. Among the accidental injuries it is suspected that a certain number are suicides and homicides, but it is hard to know. The point is that many of these deaths require purposeful action. In subsequent decades the leading causes of death are related to tobacco, drugs and alcohol, all of which require purposeful action (as opposed to Acts of God). Make life choices wisely and with an eye toward health.



“In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.” – Fred Rogers

Mr. Rogers enjoins us to lean on one another and to be tolerant and receptive. We are much more powerful when we combine our efforts and work together. It is likely that Mr. Rogers has done more to improve the health and

happiness of generations of Americans than any other single individual. We should continue to listen to him.

To summarize, stress and adversity are unavoidable concomitants of human life; some are good and some are bad. To lead full, rewarding, healthful and happy lives we need to be able to recognize adversity and have the knowledge and courage to employ a wide armamentarium of tools to deal with it both preventively and as we engage it.

- Human relationships are fundamental to our existence. We can all handle minor adversities as individuals, but there comes the day for all of us when we will need the love and support of others. Try every day to foster a strong relationship with family and friends. If you need help, ask.
- Exercise daily, if possible, but at least five times per week. Find an exercise you enjoy and can continue to enjoy for a lifetime.
- Find peace and rejuvenation in your spiritual values, whatever they may be.
- Illicit drugs and alcohol are bad choices. It once was thought that small doses of alcohol were harmless or perhaps even healthful, but recent research shows this to be absolutely untrue. Total abstinence is the best and safest policy.
- Make good choices. Choose to be happy and healthy: physically and mentally.

Further resource links:

Kumar, S. (2016, June 30). *Burnout and doctors: Prevalence, prevention and intervention*. Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5041038/>

Learn how to build resilience every day, one day at a time. Newport Institute. (2023, April 28). https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/resilience-toolkit/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=NI_performancemax&utm_term=&kpid=go_cmp-17672242732_adg-ad-dev-c_ext-prd-&gclid=CjwKCAjwv8qkBhAnEiwAkY-ahvSHECFYSnIYjhpqNkiLPU5ATNZtYNUr8w0TN3AJNPOFxrB1N2fRhxoCCO8QAvD_BwE

How to create a culture of resilience - indeed. (n.d.). <https://au.indeed.com/lead/create-culture-of-resilience>

How to build emotional resilience instead of making New Year's resolutions. Newport Institute. (2023a, January 4). https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/build-resilience/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=NI_performancemax&utm_term=&kpid=go_cmp-17672242732_adg-ad-dev-c_ext-prd-&gclid=Cj0KCQjw1_SkBhDwARIsANbGpFuc5ciM-1cBzQwG2XzgO0LsADiZy9wDLdqVrM8bp9ErUIGPlgqRSGgaAmQAEALw_wcB