

Cultivating Resilience

by Michelle Muratori, Ph.D.

The concept of *resilience*, that is, the ability to adapt well to stressful events or to recover quickly from adversity, is not only applicable to large-scale tragedies such as terrorism or those wrought by Mother Nature. Resilience is a quality that is useful in everyday life—and one that will be invaluable to you in college.

Challenges in College

While college should be an exciting and rewarding experience, it is likely to be stressful at times, too. For example, you may experience stress as you learn to navigate new academic or social challenges without the comfort of family members nearby for support or guidance. Other challenges might include dealing with homesickness; negotiating ground rules and conflicts with roommates; meeting new people and learning to accommodate different personalities, value systems, and lifestyles; and juggling a demanding academic schedule with extracurricular activities, social obligations, and perhaps even a part-time job.

Some challenges may be predictable or expected, while others may catch you off guard. College students can become ill in the middle of a demanding semester or break an arm on a semester break (pardon the pun!). We cannot always predict what lies ahead of us in life, but we can work on increasing our resilience to help us cope more effectively with life's demands, whatever they might be and whenever they occur.

How Resilient Are You?

A first step in strengthening your resilience is to reflect on your current capacity for it. Stop for a moment and consider how you tend to react to stressful situations or minor setbacks in your life. For instance, if you receive a lower score than you were expecting on an exam or assignment, what would be your typical reaction? Would you blame yourself for underperforming or your teacher for providing unclear instructions, a flawed test, unreasonable expectations, etc., and find it difficult to let it go? Or would you take responsibility without endlessly berating yourself or your teacher, and allow yourself to learn from the experience and move forward? Of course there are many other possible ways of reacting, but the point is that a setback or upsetting situation: we can get stuck in an endless cycle of negative emotions and self-defeating thoughts about a situation, or we can choose to handle it with greater resilience.

If you're wondering whether resilience is truly a choice and an ability that can be developed, the answer is yes. Those

who adopt an optimistic outlook on life may have an advantage in developing resilience; however, those with a more pessimistic outlook can also learn to handle setbacks and stress effectively. If you believe that you need to increase your capacity for resilience, now may be the perfect time to start building it. Like any skill, practice helps!

Factors That Promote Resilience

According to the American Psychological Association, factors that contribute to resilience include the ability to make and implement realistic plans, a positive self-concept and self-confidence, effective problem-solving and communication skills, the ability to self-regulate emotions and impulses, and supportive and caring relationships.

If you fall short in any of these areas, try the following:

- Make the effort to strengthen your connections with people and accept support from others when you need it; helping others in need is also an excellent strategy for strengthening resilience.
- Try reframing negative events as opportunities for personal growth, and remind yourself that better times are to come. Remaining hopeful about the future has therapeutic value.
- Differentiate between what is and isn't within your power to change, and create realistic goals related to what you can change. This is likely to leave you feeling more empowered.
- Keep your situation in proper perspective and practice good self-care by attending to your own needs—especially when you're under stress.
- And finally, remember that counseling services exist for a good reason—to provide support in times of need. If you find yourself experiencing distress, take care of yourself by reaching out for professional help.

Cultivating resilience is a process, not a one-time event, so be sure to credit yourself for taking even small steps in a positive direction. That, in itself, may even help to boost your resilience! ■

