

The virtuous spiral of mental resilience

There were warning signs for the arrival of COVID-19 in the UK, but the sudden shift from it being seen as a China-specific problem to a global pandemic happened at such high speed that many of us were ushered into social distancing and lockdown before we had time to really get to grips with world events. Those first few days of regulatory social distancing sent a shock wave through the country as we scrambled to make sense of the changes around us.

Now, at the end of week 3 of social distancing, the uncertainty lingers. Some are worried about their businesses. Others for their families. Some are feeling isolated and alone, others oppressed and confined. I hope that we know that we will be fine, that this will pass. But without a clear end in sight and no certain exit strategy from social distancing, there is a great need for positivity and mental resilience. We are all much, much stronger than we think. We have reserves deep inside of us. Now is the time to reach deep within to build mental stability and strength.

Finding space for creativity, compassion and hope

Our neural system prepares our mind and body in two ways: to prepare us for fight, flight and freeze, or to prepare us for rest and digest. Both are essential to survive and to thrive. But elongated periods of stress can lock us into the flight, fight or freeze zone creating untold physiological and psychological damage.

As our heart beats faster, and blood is pumped in preparation for fight and flight, so our stress levels increase. To counter this, we need to input positive, calming, regulatory emotions into our mind/body system to restore a state of calm where our heart rate slows, our breathing becomes deeper, and we can once again find the space for creativity, compassion and hope.

One way to do this is to focus on things that we can control, and by doing so we ignite a virtuous cycle of proactivity and positivity. As individuals we cannot control the virus, or the weather. We cannot control other people's emotions. But we can control our response to the virus or the weather. We can choose to use the time to upskill or learn something new. We can control how much we communicate with other people and what type of communication we want.

When we focus on areas within our control, we set targets and small goals. We take charge of our actions and proactively look toward the future allowing for hope. And the return on this very personal investment is a gain in confidence, an increase in compassion and empathy, and a sense of autonomy and control. These positive emotions and actions further trigger the parasympathetic neural system of rest and digest allowing for yet more optimism and opportunity.

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Giving trumps receiving

Another method to build mental resilience is to help others. Research using fMRI neuroimaging suggests that giving has greater brain benefits than receiving. This is related to greater activity in parts of the brain to do with stress reduction, reward-motivator pathways and social connections. So, helping others is in fact a great method for self-care. When we give, we receive. When we are kind, we boost our own physical and mental wellbeing.

When we are generous, we evoke compassion and empathy. All of these are key ingredients of self-care and resilience.

Taking control

How can you boost your mental resilience? You can focus on the things you can control. You can offer small acts of kindness. You can be generous and give, not money, but help, support, an ear. You can hush your flight and fight mode and feed your rest and digest.

This is the cycle that we should be aiming to trigger, the virtuous cycle of positivity and solution-focused action. It takes just one small step to start the dynamic movement towards a positive and resilient frame of mind. What will your step be?

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