

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is resilience?**

It's commonly described as the ability to bounce back from difficult circumstances—to find happiness and life satisfaction despite challenges with relationships, finances, health or any of the myriad stressors that we face in life. It's finding hope and meaning in life even while confronting obstacles. It's finding the motivation to take on new challenges and opportunities. It's thriving in the face of whatever life throws at you. Resilience is the ability to maintain or regain well-being and progress toward valued goals in the face of adversity.

### **In order to be resilient, do you have to be happy and optimistic all the time?**

Resilience is not about acting happy all the time, or ignoring the very real difficulties in life. Resilience is not even about trying to eliminate negative thoughts or feelings. In fact, it's quite the opposite: A significant part of being resilient involves what researchers call "positive adaptation" or "realistic optimism" – remaining hopeful about the future while making plans that enable us to cope with our actual reality. It requires moving forward despite facing difficult events and emotions. It requires both courage and hope.

### **Are you born resilient or is it something you develop?**

The truth is that some people are naturally more resilient. Researchers have found that people have a natural "set point" for resilience that is determined partly by genetics, and partly by their early environmental circumstances. Together, those factors make up about half their capacity to adapt positively to significant challenges; but the other half of resilience actually comes from learning and using a set of cognitive, behavioral and interpersonal skills. Not only can these skills be learned, but they can also be practiced, so that when difficult times arise, you have tools that can help boost your resilience.

### **What skills can help you thrive under challenging circumstances?**

- Adaptability, or having mental and emotional flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances
- Good interpersonal communication, including empathy and ability to "read" nonverbal cues
- Good problem-solving abilities
- Ability to tolerate strong negative emotions
- Good impulse control, including the ability to enhance or suppress the expression of emotions, depending on circumstances
- Self-efficacy, or an individual's belief that he or she has the ability to exert influence over his or her life and succeed
- Curiosity, or the tendency to ask questions and attempt to understand things

- Humor, or the ability to laugh at oneself and with others
- Creativity, or using art, writing, music, theater, etc., to express oneself
- Realistic optimism, or the ability to stay positive and hopeful about the future, even while making plans for reality
- Initiative, or a tendency to seek out new challenges that stretch one's existing abilities, and to develop strengths and passions, without being restricted by perfectionism or embarrassment.

### **What is adaptability and how does it impact resilience?**

Having mental and emotional flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances. If you're not meeting the goal for the day, it helps to have the flexibility or adaptability to shift the goal to something else, knowing you can always come back to that original goal on another day. If you can get to a place where you see that variability as part of living with MS, something you can manage, you will do better. Being adaptable will help you to still have "wins" despite your goals changing.

### **Why is the ability to change one's perspective important?**

One of the primary elements of improving resilience involves changing one's perspective. The knowledge that thoughts influence emotions and behaviors underlies much of modern-day psychology. So, while there are many things in life that people can't control—illness, world events, traffic congestion—they can change how they perceive and respond to them.

A shift in perspective is more than just positive thinking, however; it enables people to creatively identify new, effective solutions to problems.

### **How does one go about changing their perspective or perception?**

Psychologists outline the process for this as ABCD:

Adversity: The events in our lives that we can't change

Belief: Our interpretation of the event, including why we think it happened, and whether we think it's temporary or permanent

Consequence: How we think, act and feel as a result of the event

Disputation: When we acknowledge our belief as a belief, not a fact, and then challenge it by looking for other possible explanations. We can develop a "counter-fact"—a new way of framing the event so we feel fortunate rather than helpless. To do this, it may be helpful to pretend we're arguing with a friend about it.

### **What is post traumatic growth and what role does it play in building resilience?**

People who cope with stress by creating solutions to their problems rather than avoiding or ignoring them may find themselves in the midst of what's been termed "post-traumatic growth," which is essentially the opposite of the more familiar "post-traumatic stress disorder." They experience greater self-confidence,

personal strength, spirituality, compassion for others and stronger relationships. They sometimes describe it not as merely “bouncing back” but “bouncing forward.”

### **What is self-efficacy and how does it contribute to resilience?**

Self-efficacy is having the confidence in yourself that you can do what you need to do and manage what comes your way.

### **Why is physical wellness an important component of building resilience?**

Maximizing physical wellness with healthy eating habits, exercise, sleep and MS therapies can help manage symptoms. Both exercise and sleep can promote improved mood and memory, which will help an individual’s outlook and problem-solving skills.

### **How does setting realistic goals help build resilience?**

This helps people feel fulfilled, competent and in control when they’re successful. Conversely, it’s important to know when to say when. If goals are unrealistic, people may begin to feel overwhelmed. Research has found that people who quit unattainable goals actually have better mental and physical health (and lower cortisol levels) than those who keep pushing against all odds.

### **How can practicing gratitude contribute to resilience?**

Practicing gratitude for the positive things in their lives is helpful. Many people keep a gratitude journal, listing one or more good things each day that they feel thankful for. It really helps to bring into focus that there is always something positive in life.

### **Why is managing your emotions important in building resilience?**

When someone is having a strong emotion, there are several things they can do. And one of them is to simply be aware of the emotion and recognize that it doesn’t define who you are or how you’re going to feel in the next moment. It’s just a feeling, and it doesn’t define you as a person. Nurturing positive emotions, including hope, optimism, and humor – and savoring them when they occur contributes to building resilience.

### **Why is faith and spirituality a component of resilience for many?**

Faith communities can be supportive in difficult times, and may help you address questions like, “Why me?” Spirituality doesn’t have to mean religion (though it can), but can also refer to a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself.

### **What is mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience. Mindfulness can help shift our perspective and change our mindset. Using mindfulness and relaxation approaches to minimize intrusive thoughts and emotions. This can include the use of breathing techniques, imagery, progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness meditation, such as MBSR.

### **Why is resilience important to people with MS?**

Building resilience can improve the quality of life for almost anyone. Research shows that people with high levels of resilience have better long-term physical and psychological health. They have lower risks of heart disease and get infections less often. They are less likely to experience depression and anxiety.

People with MS, perhaps even more than most, can benefit from building their resilience because of the ongoing, unpredictable changes they face in their health, abilities and self-image. This kind of unpredictability can lead people with MS to believe they have little control over their lives—a feeling that can spiral into depression, poor management of their disease or changes in their relationships.

### **Why is resilience important for family members?**

Resilience is important for family members of people with MS, too. The disease never impacts just one person. Spouses, children, parents and siblings all experience changes in their lives when a loved one has MS. Sometimes it means a shift in household or financial obligations; sometimes it changes a family's social life, or even where a family lives.

### **What are the three stages to building resilience?**

1. **Understanding.** People in this stage invest their time and energy in learning as much as they can about the situation they are facing. People newly diagnosed with MS might begin learning about the symptoms of the disease, the leading theories on what causes it, and how the disease may change over time. They may begin to seek out others living with the disease and expanding their understanding of the range of ways MS can affect people.

2. **Managing.** People in this stage begin to learn new coping strategies and lifestyle behaviors. Not only do they discover how to best take care of themselves physically, socially and financially, but they also start to trying different methods for managing the stress and unpredictability that can occur with a disease like MS. As a result, people in this stage may begin to feel more confident and empowered.

3. **Growth.** People in this stage may start to experience shifts in their priorities. They have a more developed understanding of what is important to them in life and what is not. They may begin to pursue their passions and take steps to strengthen their relationships. They may begin to feel a sense of gratitude for the positive things in their lives.

## **Why is identifying your strengths an important step in becoming more resilient?**

The goal of identifying your strengths is to become comfortable using them day in and day out – so that when you're faced with trying circumstances, you can rely on your strengths to see you through.

## **What are some obstacles to resilience?**

There are obstacles to resilience as well, which seem to be most prominent during early and middle adulthood, when people are acutely focused on careers and families, and managing MS symptoms feels particularly difficult. These obstacles include physical fatigue, depression, and social isolation (whether initiated by the person with MS, or by a process of losing friends who don't seem to understand the disease and its impacts). People who feel burned out or anxious about their constantly changing symptoms, or who feel a stigma associated with having a chronic illness also have a harder time developing resilience. Perfectionism, too, can get in the way. It's a difficult lesson for many, but sometimes "good enough" has to be enough.