



Digital Article / Stress Management

5 Characteristics of Stress-Resilient People (and How to Develop Them)

Focus on what you can control. *by Kandi Wiens*

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HBR Staff; Peter Dazeley/Getty images

Devon was hired into a director-level position at a global financial services firm immediately upon earning her MBA. A star former student, she completed her leadership training before her first day and was confident in her ability to hit the ground running. Six months later, however, she worried she had made a big mistake. The stress of the job was weighing her down. She found it difficult to focus most days and lay awake during the nights, second-guessing her decisions.

“I was so thrilled with the offer,” she told me. “This was the company I wanted to work at and I was familiar with the culture. But being a director is a completely different ballgame. I’ve been overwhelmed from day one. I know I have a lot to learn, but I’m not sure I’m cut out for this.”

It’s not unusual for our stress levels to spike during career transitions like moving from school into the workforce, taking on a new role, or switching fields. Even when, like Devon, we know high stress is a part of the job and understand it will be temporary, our stress can become debilitating if we lack the tools to manage it.

My studies on emotional intelligence and burnout include extensive research on leaders who are flourishing despite working in high-stress roles. Many of them have developed a quality referred to as stress resilience, or the ability to return to baseline after a stressful event and adapt in the face of adversity. While it comes easier to some people than others, it is something anyone can cultivate.

If you find yourself in a situation that mirrors what Devon is experiencing, stress resilience can help you get through it. Here are the top five characteristics and behaviors stress-resilient leaders practice, along with tips for how to learn and develop each one.

1) They have a positive, optimistic outlook.

Maintaining, or at least returning to, a positive outlook in the face of adversity is the foundation of stress resilience. When people with an optimistic outlook experience setbacks and challenges, they believe it’s a temporary state and that things will eventually get better. They’re also less likely to blame themselves for their own adversities, which prevents negative feelings that exacerbate stress, like shame and guilt.

Those with a more pessimistic outlook, by contrast, are more likely to get caught in the trap of blaming themselves or others, and imagining the worst-case-scenario.

What you can do:

In your own situation, the idea is not to be overly positive, but rather to maintain a level of emotional equilibrium when reacting to high-stress events at work. Shifting from a pessimistic-leaning to an optimistic-leaning mindset can help you recover from stress at a faster pace and see the situation through a clearer lens.

If you're feeling short on optimism, there are a few practices that can help:

- **Train yourself to think constructively about adverse events.**

There's usually a silver lining in every situation, so look for that and focus on it, rather than on its negative aspects. Reflect on the last challenge you faced: Maybe you learned something about yourself, gained a new skill, or can now find something about the experience for which you're grateful.

- **Surround yourself with people who choose to see “a glass half full.”** We tend to pick up the moods and attitudes of those around us. Align yourself with people at work who approach challenges with a positive attitude. Try to absorb and learn from their example. You may even seek out their advice when you're feeling low. (How do they get through a tough day?)

- **Start each day with a positive experience.** First impressions can set the tone for the entire day, so make a habit of giving yourself a morning dose of positivity. Examples from my study participants include enjoying a fun Peloton ride, reading uplifting content, listening to a mood-boosting song or a podcast, or watching funny reels.

- **Actively plan for a more positive future.** Think about what you want your workday to look like. Write it down and then try to take at least one step to make that vision come true. People who are proactive about planning for a brighter future are more likely to make that future a reality, and having something to look forward to increases optimism.

2) They take a problem-solving approach to stress.

Stress-resilient people view stressors as surmountable challenges and solvable problems. They're also more likely to have what's known as a stress-is-enhancing mindset, or the belief that facing and overcoming challenging experiences provides the best opportunities for growth. They may not necessarily look forward to stressful events, but they don't regard them as a threat, and they make the most of them when they arrive.

What you can do:

When faced with a stressful event on the job, your natural instinct (fight, flight, freeze mode) may push you towards anger, frustration, avoidance, or denial. If you have perfectionist tendencies and are facing a new challenge, you may even react by trying to overwork.

The key to developing a problem-solving approach to stress involves regulating your instinctual emotions (not just your thoughts). Unregulated emotions often get in the way of problem solving, so any practice that helps restore a state of calm after a stressful event — such as mindfulness meditation, exercise, journaling, being in nature, or getting support from a loved one — will bring you closer to a place of emotional regulation.

If you're caught up in strong emotion and need to quickly calm down, deep, diaphragmatic breathing can help. It triggers your parasympathetic nervous system (also known as the rest-and-digest system), which deactivates your stress response and promotes

relaxation. The sooner you can calm yourself, the sooner you can think logically about how to solve the problem as opposed to pouring your energy into managing your emotions.

3) They focus on what they can control.

Dwelling on the things you cannot change creates a sense of helplessness and heightens stress. Stress-resilient people overcome this by teaching themselves to hone in on the things they *can* change and improve — and they act on them. When they encounter situations that are truly beyond their control and that inspire a strong emotional response (e.g. a layoff, an unwanted change with no room for negotiation, the loss of key stakeholders), they are able to quickly regulate those feelings and shift to problem solving.

What you can do:

This ability is something that can be developed with intention and practice. In addition to the emotional regulation skills mentioned in the previous point, look for what you can control in stressful moments. Then pause and give it your full attention, which will lead you towards a thoughtful response rather than an immediate reaction.

One of my clients, for example, panicked when his star team member quit abruptly. It hurt to lose her, and the project she led was suddenly in jeopardy. But after he took a beat to remind himself of what was in his control, he realized that her departure was not negotiable. That pushed him to act — he could reassign her work to other team members, creating growth and development opportunities while working to backfill the position.

4) They are adaptable and flexible.

Stress-resilient people have learned how to embrace change rather than brace for change. Instead of trying to resist, put off, or avoid potentially

stressful changes, they accept that change is inevitable and approach it with curiosity and adaptability.

What you can do:

You can train yourself to be more adaptable and flexible by consciously practicing the positive emotions stress-resilient people tend to feel. According to Dr. Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory, negative emotions (such as anger, anxiety, and depression) immediately narrow our thoughts and behaviors because they focus our attention on neutralizing or avoiding whatever has caused our negative emotion — as opposed to expansive, flexible thinking that inspires many possible actions. In other words, we become singularly focused on doing whatever it takes to end the negative emotional state.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, such as joy, interest, contentment, and love, broaden our thoughts and behaviors, allowing access to a wider array of observations and insights, as well as the ability to respond in a more expansive and flexible manner. Feeling curious and interested, for example, “creates the urge to explore, take in new information and experiences, and expand the self in the process,” Fredrickson notes. Over time, a broadened mindset, fueled by positive emotions, allows us to build new physical, psychological, social, and intellectual capabilities — and enjoy all their benefits such as greater creativity, knowledge, social connection, and resilience.

When you're faced with a big change, instead of defaulting to narrow, self-limiting thinking that focuses on what you'll lose or assuming your new situation will be worse than your previous one, look for the positives in the situation. What new opportunities will this change present? How can this change benefit you and others?

Looking for opportunities rather than losses cultivates positive emotions, and reflects the open-minded attitude of stress-resilient

people. Their thinking looks more like: “I’m open to multiple possibilities,” “Here’s a chance to learn something new,” or “I’m excited to see where this will lead.”

5) They have strong relationships and social connections.

Researchers speculate that people who are lonely and socially isolated remain in chronic fight-or-flight mode, where they have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and higher levels of systemic inflammation. Over time, being in a chronic state of stress undermines health and increases our vulnerability to burnout.

Contrastingly, people who have high levels of social support are more resilient to stress and rely on their relationships to help them manage and recover from stress. Those who have stronger social connections also gain a calming effect from the oxytocin released during social interactions and feel a greater sense of belonging, both of which protect against stress. These people tend to be comfortable asking for support when their stress becomes unmanageable or they need help solving a problem, and are more likely to have a network composed of problem solvers.

What you can do:

No matter how high stress your work situation has become, a support system will only benefit you. An extensive network isn’t necessary. Even if you have one person you can turn to when stress hits, that’s enough to help you return to a regulated state. Studies have also shown that practicing empathy, when we try to understand the perspectives of others, and offering compassion, when we extend a helping hand to others, can counteract the physiological effects of stress.

To strengthen the quality of your relationships and develop greater stress resilience, listen to others with your full attention, provide

positive feedback, express appreciation to others, or participate in social groups such as professional organizations, recreational groups, or clubs.

The next time a stressful situation hits you at work, you may just find you have more tools — and people — to help you manage your feelings and reactions to it.

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Despite her misgivings, Devon really wanted to remain in her role. In the end, she built a relationship with a mentor at work who provided guidance and encouragement throughout her onboarding period, and who shared stories of the challenges she'd overcome as a new director. With her mentor supporting her and providing a model of resilience, Devon could now see a path forward — and a way to remain on it without succumbing to the ill effects of unrelenting stress.

Cultivating stress resilience doesn't mean you won't experience stress at work. It does mean you will have the ability to recover from stressful experiences and remain effective, even when your job becomes demanding. Taking time to practice the five competencies above will help you regulate your negative feelings, gain agency over the things you can control, and approach stressful situations with greater intentionality and clarity.

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