

## The Power to Change Your Life: Ten Keys to Resilient Living

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

The latest book I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein was recently released. In contrast to our previous works about resilience, which focused on developing hope and optimism in children, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, addresses the steps we can take as adults to pursue a more resilient lifestyle. We co-authored this month's article with the goal of highlighting ten keys to resilient living that we describe in our new book. It is our hope that as you read the article you will reflect upon your current mindset and behaviors and consider changes that you can make to lead a more fulfilling, balanced life.

\* \* \*

Do you often feel stressed? If you do, you're not alone. The media frequently referred to 2002 as the year of anxiety. A 2001 Gallup Poll reported that 80% of adults experienced periodic or frequent stress. A recent report issued by the National Institute of Mental Health identified 22% of American adults as suffering from a mental disorder, for many, the cumulative effect of living with stress. Stress has been implicated in, or reported to exacerbate, a wide spectrum of physical problems, including heart disease, stroke, and obesity. Unfortunately, many people under chronic stress seek relief through adverse means, such as alcohol, overeating, or withdrawal from family and friends. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that billions of dollars are spent annually in the United States as the result of stress-related compensation claims. By 1999, the stress management industry had become an eleven billion dollar phenomenon.

### **Stress Hardiness and a Resilient Mindset**

These statistics might prompt some people to become even more worried, but that is not our intention. If we recognize the effect stress has on our lives, we will be better prepared to manage it and learn to lead more productive, satisfying, healthy, and resilient lives. Being resilient

does not mean we eliminate all risks or adverse conditions, but rather when they arise we deal with these conditions effectively.

Resilient individuals possess a particular mindset and accompanying skills that help them respond to life's challenges with confidence and grace. What are the features of this mindset? What assumptions do resilient people have about themselves that reduce their vulnerability to stress and help them to cope more productively? Certainly, one's lifestyle, including exercise, diet, and sleep all influence the effectiveness with which stress is managed. But how do you nurture such a healthy existence? In this article, we will describe ten keys for developing stress hardiness and a resilient mindset and lifestyle. As you read about each key, ask yourself, "Am I practicing this? If not, what must I change to strengthen my resilient mindset?" Also, remember that changing one's mindset and behavior takes time. Be realistic in what you can accomplish within a certain timeframe. Each small step leads to reaching a larger goal.

### **Key #1: Rewrite Your Negative Scripts**

Do you find yourself saying or doing the same ineffective things over and over again? It is impressive how many people do. We often become trapped, blindly following a prescribed script that does not allow for change or creativity in the face of stress and problems. Yet, we are the authors of our lives. We can move from less satisfying, less productive scripts, to ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that foster a resilient mindset. Identify the negative scripts in your life or things you would like to change. Define short and long-term goals related to these issues. Consider new scripts, select one that you believe has the greatest chance for success, plan for obstacles, and follow through. Change cannot take place unless we become active participants in our lives.

### **Key #2: Choose a Path to Become Stress Hardy Rather Than Stressed Out**

Research indicates that stress hardy people engage in activities that bring purpose or meaning to their lives whether in their role as parent, spouse, co-worker, or friend or in the volunteer work they do. What would you list as the priorities in your life and do you spend time engaged in these activities? In addition, stress hardy individuals view difficult situations as an expected part of life. When such situations arise, they interpret them as challenges to confront and learn from rather than as stress to avoid. It

is helpful to recall that in the Chinese language the same word is used for “crisis” and “opportunity with danger.” Stress hardy people can define the factors over which they have control and those that they don’t, focusing their time and energy on situations within their sphere of influence. You might wish to do the following. Make a list of five things you want to see different in your life and then next to each item write down whether someone else has to change first for you to achieve your goal. If you discover that your happiness is based on another person changing first, whomever it may be, you might be waiting a long time to become happy. You are likely to become increasingly stressed during the wait. You will feel empowered if you focus your time and energy on what you can do differently to improve particular situations.

### **Key #3: View Life Through the Eyes of Others**

Resilient individuals develop satisfying relationships in their lives. A cornerstone of such relationships is the capacity to be empathic and to place oneself inside the shoes of others and see the world through their eyes. To become more empathic ask yourself, “In anything I say or do, what do I hope to accomplish? Do I say or do things in ways that will motivate others to be willing to listen and respond to me? Do I behave towards others in the same way I would like them to behave towards me?” Make a list of the words you hope people would use to describe you and then the words you think they would actually use. Reflect upon what actions you might take to change your behavior so that the two lists of words are more in accord with each other.

### **Key #4: Communicate Effectively**

The ability to communicate effectively is an integral component of resilience and is closely linked to empathy. Effective communication includes an appreciation of how our verbal and nonverbal messages are perceived by others and our capacity to be an active listener. Active listeners attempt to understand what the other person is expressing and even if they disagree they are respectful and validate that they “hear” the other person’s viewpoint. The more effectively we learn to convey our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs verbally and nonverbally, the more successful and resilient we will be.

### **Key #5: Accept Yourself and Others**

If you are to nurture a resilient mindset, you must learn to accept yourself. Acceptance implies possessing realistic expectations and goals,

recognizing your strengths as well as vulnerabilities, and leading an authentic, balanced life in which your behaviors are in accord with your values and goals. Make a list of five things that are important to you and consider why these are important. View each item on your list and reflect upon how much of your time and energy is expended to achieve what you have listed. As you learn to accept yourself, as you gain a clear picture of your strengths and vulnerabilities, as you articulate your values, you will be in a position to remove those factors that serve as obstacles to realizing a more honest, enriched life.

### **Key #6: Make Connections and Display Compassion**

It is difficult to be resilient if we do not nurture connections in our lives—connections to other people, to ideals, to our faith, to causes. Psychologist Julius Segal, when discussing individuals who enrich the lives of children, referred to them as “charismatic adults,” people from whom children “gather strength.” Even as adults we need people in our lives from whom we gather strength. In addition, our resilience will be enhanced if we serve as a source of strength and support for others. In this regard, consider the following questions: “Who are the two or three people who serve as charismatic adults in my life? What have they done that has prompted me to list them in this way? What people would say that I am the charismatic adult in their lives, and why? Aside from relationships with people, what other activities in my life supply me with a sense of connectedness? In what ways am I compassionate and giving?” Being connected to and helping others provide meaning to our lives and serve as nutrients for resilience.

### **Key #7: Learn to Deal with Mistakes**

The ways in which we understand and respond to mistakes and failure are an integral part of a resilient mindset. When you make a mistake, what do you tell yourself? How do you react? Resilient people consider mistakes as experiences for learning and growth. They ask themselves, “What can I do differently next time to succeed?” Those who are not resilient typically interpret mistakes as attributable to conditions that cannot be easily corrected, such as a lack of intelligence. They feel defeated by mistakes and often end up blaming others or quitting or refusing to attempt things. Observe what you say to yourself when you make a mistake. It will give you a clue to how resilient you are and what you might have to change.

**Key #8: Learn to Deal with Success and Build Islands of Competence**

Just as the manner in which we understand and respond to setbacks is an integral part of a resilient mindset so too, is the way we react to successes in our lives. Think about how you understand your achievements. Those who are resilient view their accomplishments as based upon their own resources and strengths. This doesn't mean they fail to acknowledge the support of others. Rather, they don't dismiss or minimize what they have achieved. In contrast, people who are not resilient tend to attribute their success to factors outside their control such as luck or chance or fate. Consequently, they are not as confident or optimistic about being successful in the future. There is another feature of resilient people we wish to highlight. While they do not deny their vulnerabilities, they are able to identify their strengths or what we call their "islands of competence." What would you list as your islands of competence? Do you regularly engage in these strengths to bolster your resilience?

**Key #9: Continue Developing Self-Discipline and Self-Control**

Self-discipline and self-control play a significant role in our daily activities. When we think before we act, when we consider the feelings of others, when we reflect upon possible solutions to problems, when we behave in a rational and thoughtful way, when we engage in developing a business plan, when we keep from screaming at someone who has done something to make us angry, we are displaying self-discipline and self-control. It is a major component of stress-hardiness and resilience. Self-discipline and self-control must be exercised in the following ways: Accept ownership for your behavior. Be consistent, but not rigid. Become a proactive problem solver, thinking of different solutions before you act. Believe that every problem has a possible solution. Remember that with effort and patience, possible solutions become probable solutions. It is difficult to be resilient and have satisfying relationships if you are impulsive, arbitrary, and unpredictable. We believe that these negative traits can be changed as long as we first acknowledge their existence and then develop a realistic plan of action to modify these counterproductive behaviors.

**Key #10: Maintaining Your Resilient Lifestyle Takes Work**

If we abandon well-established diets and exercise, our health will suffer. The same principle is true when we consider the maintenance of a resilient lifestyle. Once you have developed the features associated with a

resilient mindset and lifestyle, you cannot settle back and assume these qualities will be maintained on automatic pilot. Expected and unexpected challenges will emerge that will test your ability to be resilient. The more you understand the characteristics of resilient individuals, the more you can engage in daily and long-term exercises to maintain, and even strengthen, a resilient mindset. Each and every day consider: “Have I listened and communicated effectively with others? Have I responded to stress, mistakes, and setbacks in thoughtful ways? Have I maintained connections to people, ideals, causes, and faith?” Leading a resilient lifestyle should be in constant focus.

### **A Resilient Mindset Will Change Your Life**

The road towards nurturing a resilient mindset and lifestyle, one that leads to stress hardiness, is neither straightforward, nor direct. The road often contains obstacles and detours that interfere with reaching your destinations. However, the more knowledgeable you are about the components of a resilient mindset, as well as the roadblocks to its attainment, the more diligent you can become to change any existing counterproductive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. By so doing, you will become better equipped and confident to discover those paths that lead to a productive, fulfilling life, a life that encourages you to plan and dream, to bring joy to others, to laugh, and to appreciate that you truly are the author of your own life.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>