

Your “Word” of the Year?

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

This month’s article, co-authored with my friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, was prompted by an idea advanced by author and publisher Arianna Huffington. The latter proclaimed [Resilience the word of the year in 2020](#). Recently, she elaborated on that word by designating *Resilience+* as the word of the year for 2021, adding, “*Resilience+* is my leading contender for word of the decade.” She cautioned that while she is aware that the decade is still very young, “it’s hard to imagine anything displacing it in the years ahead.”

Why the “+”? Huffington observed that just as Disney, Apple, and Discovery appended a plus sign to their names to identify countless hours of their on-demand streaming services, the concept of resilience deserved the same designation. She reasoned that our hope that the pandemic would have a clear ending by the end of 2021 was not to be realized and that it now appears likely the coronavirus and its variants will remain part of our landscape for years to come. She proposed that the seeming lack of an expiration date for COVID has contributed to an evolving shift in our understanding of resilience—from viewing it as “an end state we can reach to a constant process of becoming.”

Huffington explained, “In the presence of endless uncertainty, apocalyptic weather events, political instability, and new variants that upend the best-laid plans, *Resilience+* is the on-demand quality we cannot do without—a constant process rather than a final destination. Not a marker to reach, but a mindset.”

Resilience: A Process and a Mindset

An understanding of resilience as a process and not as an endpoint, a process that involves a specified mindset, is one we have long embraced and advocated. As an example, in all of our books about resilience, including [Raising Resilient Children](#) and [The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life](#) (*place links for these two books to Amazon*), we have identified the components of what we label a “Resilient Mindset” together with the behaviors that accompany this mindset. We have defined “mindset” as the assumptions and expectations we possess about ourselves and others that guide our behaviors and influence the skills we develop; in turn, these behaviors and skills influence our set of assumptions so that a dynamic process of change is constantly operating.

Our efforts to identify the features of a resilient mindset represent more than an academic exercise. We believe that the more precisely we can articulate these features, the more successfully we can develop strategies for nurturing this mindset and resilient behaviors in ourselves and in our children. Huffington offered a similar position by citing the work of psychologist and neuroscientist Richard Davidson on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Davidson has researched and written about brain activity associated with the presence of positive emotions, a topic [I addressed in an earlier website article](#).

Huffington, referring to Davidson's research, asserted, "We can actually train ourselves to be happier through practice in very tangible and measurable ways by giving ourselves the resources to deal with the ups and downs of life. Similarly, we can train ourselves to be more resilient through practice, and that's the essence of *Resilience+*." In concert with this opinion, Sam and I have emphasized that mindsets are open to change, that although it may take much time and effort to move from a pessimistic, hopeless outlook to a perspective filled with optimism and hope, it is possible to accomplish. In *The Power of Resilience* we wrote, "The more we understand the beliefs that guide our behaviors, the more successfully we can engage in the process of replacing counterproductive, self-defeating assumptions with those that will lead to a more resilient, fulfilling life."

Resilience for All Times

Sam and I have emphasized for years that while resilience is especially critical during times of adversity, its significance is not confined to troubled times. Rather, if we conceptualize resilience as a mindset that can be modified and strengthened, it can encourage us at any time to nurture the components of this mindset in anticipation of future challenges and setbacks. In addition, when resilience is positioned within a theory of mindset, its relevance for leading a more satisfying, accomplished life even in the absence of significant adversity cannot be underestimated.

During our 30-year-collaboration, which includes the publication of our most recent book [*Tenacity in Children: Nurturing the Seven Instincts for Lifetime Success*](#), Sam and I have described the components of a resilient mindset and resilient lifestyle. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail these components, but the reader is referred to a summary article [we posted on our individual websites](#) when we co-authored *The Power of Resilience*.

The latter book and article were written in 2003. In the article we noted a recent Gallup poll as well as a report issued by the National Institute of Mental Health that revealed the high level of stress and mental health issues being experienced by American adults at that time. Anxiety, depression, and mental health problems have increased since 2003, exacerbated during the past two years by the disruptive, life-threatening emergence of the pandemic.

As stress and mental health issues expand among all age groups, we believe a focus on *Resilience+* is more urgent than ever before. In our recent writings and webinars we have accented the need to adopt a perspective of “personal control,” of recognizing that while the presence and severity of the coronavirus and its variants remain unpredictable, we can maintain more control than we may realize over our attitude and response to this unpredictability. The issues occasioned by COVID-19 are not likely to end soon—a point highlighted by Huffington when she suggested that we designate *Resilience+* as the word of the decade; it is imperative that we develop and help ourselves and our children develop effective coping strategies that will fortify a foundation for resilience.

I chronicled the unpredictable times in which we live—when hope can feel so illusory and so vulnerable—in [my September, 2021 article](#). I referred to our experiences during the past two years as an “emotional roller coaster ride.” Sam too, in [his article posted in July 2020](#), described the distorted thinking driven by stress that overwhelms children and adults alike. Given brief periods of optimism being cast aside by new challenges and stresses, it would be wise to consider the work of psychologist Gabriele Oettingen, author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking*. She has developed an important model bolstered by research data to demonstrate the need to “combine positive thinking with realism.” She suggested that we not only reflect on our wishes and goals but also consider the possible obstacles we may confront in realizing these goals. To minimize the probability that a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure might be elicited by our forecasting the barriers we might encounter as we strive to reach our goals, Oettingen requested that participants in her studies detail the strategies they might use to cope with these obstacles should they arise.

This focus on wishes, obstacles, and ways to manage these obstacles, a technique that Oettingen labeled “mental contrasting,” led participants in her studies to achieve better outcomes on different tasks when compared with those who focused solely on their wishes or increasingly dwelt on possible obstacles but without considering how to effectively manage these roadblocks.

An honest appraisal of possible obstacles, accompanied with a knowledge of strategies to apply if the obstacles emerge, basically reflects a belief in personal control, heightens a feeling of optimism, and increases the likelihood of our goals being realized.

***Resilience+* in Uncertain Times**

Let us return once again to the insights of Arianna Huffington. She noted that uncertainty has become part of our lives, requiring a focus on nurturing *Resilience+*, a concept that she identified as “both our vaccine and our booster for life—and just as boosters are essential for our physical immunity, a daily process of strengthening our resilience is essential for our emotional and mental immunity.” Referring to her introduction of the “+” symbol, she added, “And unlike the streaming platforms, which are designed to hook us, and if we binge-watch through the night, deplete us, *Resilience+* is about refueling and replenishing so we can meet whatever challenges 2022 holds with less stress, more joy, and endlessly renewable stores of resilience.”

To accomplish this task of refueling and replenishing, it is vital that we be guided by a sense of personal control, that we subscribe to the belief that we are the authors of our own lives. Sam and I have advised that we not seek our happiness by asking someone else or a situation to change first but instead ask ourselves, “What is it that I can do differently to change the situation?” In our writings we have frequently quoted Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, author of the thought-provoking, emotionally powerful book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. His reflections about maintaining personal control even as a prisoner within the confines of a concentration camp are well worth considering as we cope with today’s challenges. In ending this article we turn once again to his words (I think it is important to note that while Frankl refers only to “men” in the following quote since he was imprisoned only with men, his thoughts apply equally to the courage and compassion displayed in the barracks that housed women):

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing, the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.