



Strengthening resilience through mindfulness

JUST A FEW MINUTES OF MINDFULNESS EVERY DAY CAN CLEAR AWAY DISTRACTING THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE

How often do you feel mentally drained, and you haven't even started your day? Perhaps it's because you've made dozens of mental decisions, thinking about something in the past and anticipating a future event, meeting, or deadline. While this is part of being human, this article will address how you can use the core strength of what we call resilience to lift the cognitive and emotional load of life. You can also use tools, such as mindfulness, to practice becoming more resilient in your professional and personal life.

Resilience is the ability to "bounce back" from difficult experiences and deal with life's challenges, even when those events are overwhelming or devastating. "If you are carrying an excessive load, you can either decrease the load or increase the capacity to lift the load," says Amit Sood, M.D., author of the Mayo Clinic *Handbook for Happiness*.

Some people are born with characteristics of resilience or a more positive outlook. But the rise of resilience research demonstrates that it isn't necessarily a trait that people either have or don't have. Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed. Research also demonstrates that people's resilience is enhanced by training and makes a measurable difference in the experience of stress, anxiety, chronic fatigue and mindful attention.

The practice of resilience changes the structure of our brains, a process called neuroplasticity. Dan Siegel, M.D., in his groundbreaking book *Mindsight, The New Science of Personal Transformation*, explains that neuroplasticity involves the capacity for new neural connections and growing new neurons in response to experience. It can occur throughout our lifespan.

Having been on the bench since 2000 as a judge at the State Bar Court, the Supervising Judge of the Southern California Alternative Discipline

Program, and for the last 17 years at the Los Angeles Superior Court, I've seen my fair share of attorneys who are burned out. Not all lawyers are prepared for the high conflict surrounding client relationships, the belligerency of opposing counsel, the wrangle of the courtroom and personal crises. When lawyers bring the baggage of unmanaged stress – professional and personal – into the courtroom and their work environment, it can lead to avoidable adverse consequences.

Chronic incivility – rudeness, disrespect, belittling others, speaking in a condescending tone – is unhealthy. No judge or members of the courtroom staff look forward to dealing with lawyers in this condition. At the same time, there are plenty of judges who already feel overburdened by heavy dockets, weighty decisions, repeated exposure to disturbing evidence and traumatized parties and victims, anxiety over time limits, social isolation, false and misleading public attacks and the threat of recall and election challenge. We are all vulnerable and susceptible to stress and burnout. Given the destructive nature of incivility, we all need to be able to recognize these problems in ourselves so as to keep them from interfering in our relationships with others, and improve our well-being.

Do you wonder if you need to increase your resilience? Sood suggests asking yourself a simple question. "Over the last month, how stressed have I felt on a scale of one – being not at all – to ten?" He says, "If you are above a five, you can be helped by resilience."

Many resources are available to improve resilience, including the Mayo Clinic resilience training program. Online courses can also be found at Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center in partnership with Rick Hanson, Ph.D. at The Resilience Summit. Some of the fundamentals of resilience training are: Social – having good nurturing relationships to help you better withstand life's challenges. Spiritual – living a life full of meaning.

Physical – regular exercise, sleep and a healthy diet. Emotional – boosting your ability to sustain positive emotions and recover quickly from negative ones. Mental – heightening focus and improving mindset through mindfulness, meditation and yoga.

What exactly are mindfulness and meditation? These terms are often used interchangeably, but they're not the same. "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally," says Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., Professor of Medicine Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic (in 1979) and best-selling author of *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.

Mindfulness involves focusing on the breath to cultivate attention on the body and mind as they are, moment to moment. You allow your thoughts to come and go and don't get attached to them. Mindfulness is about retraining your brain (neuroplasticity). When you are being actively mindful, you are noticing and paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and behaviors and how you react to them. This is a practice that requires both consistency and time.

Many say they can't sit still with their thoughts and feelings for more than a few minutes because their mind won't stop wandering. Some research suggests that mind-wandering comprises as much as 50% of waking life. We can all relate to mind-wandering and having off-task thoughts during an ongoing task or activity, something that impacts our sensory input and increases errors in the task at hand. Paying attention and noticing and being in the moment reduces mind-wandering and helps you achieve equanimity, especially while under stress.

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The beauty of mindfulness is you can practice it anytime, anywhere, and with anyone. Just a few minutes of mindfulness every day can clear away distracting thoughts, storylines and emotional baggage.

Mindfulness and meditation embody many similarities and can overlap. Meditation can be an important part of a mindfulness practice. It typically refers to a formal, seated practice that focuses on opening your heart, expanding awareness, increasing calmness and concentrating inward.

Mindfulness is associated with calm and that's all the more reason why the U.S. Army has initiated mindfulness training for its soldiers to intensify mental focus, improve discernment of key information under chaotic circumstances, and increase memory function. Likewise, Fortune 500 companies such as Apple, Google, Nike, Procter & Gamble and Aetna incorporate meditation practice into their work

environments, believing that meditation helps employee mental health and well-being, reduces stress, and improves listening and emotional intelligence.

Kabat-Zinn says, "The best way to capture moments is to pay attention. This is how we cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing." Making mindfulness part of your daily routine isn't a lot of work and can be integrated into many repetitive activities. From walking, hiking and yoga, exercise is an excellent time to cultivate mindfulness. Cooking, art and music are opportune moments. Even gardening, housework and doing chores are activities to not let your mind go somewhere else; rather, use that time to focus on the task at hand.

Mindfulness is broadly accepted as a mainstream strategy with positive scientific results to improve resilience and well-being. It helps you maintain a realistic sense of control and choices,

especially how to react in a given situation. It helps you maintain a positive outlook and perspective and accept change. It can literally impact your mind and body, your professional and interpersonal relationships, your career and daily life. And all the benefits are free.

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