

## The COVID Resilience Guide

### Proven Ways to Handle COVID (or Any Challenge)

*Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.*

*-Nelson Mandela*

**Bottom line:** We are dealing with a rapidly spreading, deadly disease that didn't even exist several months ago. For many, it is a threat to life and to livelihood, and it has isolated us from each other and changed the way we live our daily lives. There is a lot we still don't know about COVID-19. We are understandably afraid, experiencing shortages of healthcare resources, and risk becoming ill or losing loved ones. And yet...

We are more than victims. One of the amazing things about people is that we adapt. We learn. We rise to challenges. We don't yet have proven treatments for this disease, but research is underway. Medications are being tried, healthcare teams are trying to optimize the best ways to do prevention and treatment, and work on a vaccine has begun. Every day, thousands of acts of kindness and compassion unfold as we do what we can to protect each other. Whether it is social distancing, donating supplies, reaching out to others who are isolated, or any number of other small (or large) heroic acts, we are rising to the challenge.

While we still have a lot to learn about COVID, *we already know a lot about ourselves*. We know from research – and from long experience - many ways to stay healthy, increase our resistance to illnesses like COVID-19, cope with stress, and bounce back from trauma. In short, we know a lot about *resilience*, and that empowers us even during times like this.

This guide offers some specific options you can choose that can help you be at your best when it comes to handling COVID, or anything else that comes your way.

### What is Resilience?

Resilience has been described many ways, mainly around how we can successfully adapt -and even grow – after trauma, stress, or tragedy.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization notes there are “protective factors and assets” that allow us to adapt to challenges so that we better after trauma or stress.<sup>2</sup> The goal, then, is to bring in and develop those resilience factors so that we can deal with challenges more effectively. One person may handle a challenge and perhaps even find ways to grow from it (or in spite of it), while another person may never recover from it.

However, resilience isn't just a personality trait, or something we are born with; it involves thoughts, behaviors and actions that people can develop.

Resilience *isn't* always rebounding back to where you started, either. Our experiences change us all the time. The question is, how will they change us, and how much control do we have over that? Do we stay caught up in our pain or fear, or do we break through it? Many of us will

be wounded -physically, emotionally, financially, or in other ways because of COVID. Resilience is about being able to protect ourselves as well as we can, as well as doing the best we can to recover from what happens to us. It isn't easy to adapt or cope, but it's worth it, and much better than the alternative.

## Why Does Resilience Matter?

Resilience has multiple benefits. People who are more resilient feel the same degree of emotion after a trauma, but they are able to get on with their lives and start functioning sooner.<sup>3</sup> We know that older people who cope better emotionally have healthier immune systems and hearts, are less likely to be depressed or anxious, are more aware, and are more satisfied with their lives.<sup>4-5</sup> Optimism, which is closely linked to resilience, decreases risk of dying from a number of causes and is linked to more self-care.<sup>6-7</sup> Clinical and organizational work are likely to be safer and more effective if resilience is a focus.<sup>8</sup> In short, resilience improves our quality of life and can have any number of health benefits.

## How Can I Boost My Resilience During this COVID Pandemic?

Fortunately, there is a lot about resilience you can control. Your behaviors can influence your gene expression and body chemistry. You can work to heal from traumatic past experiences. Your brain can create new connections (neuroplasticity). You can shift your thinking patterns and emotions, change your outlook, get more support from others, and build up your skills for handling stress. As an added bonus, you may see that working in one area to promote resilience positively affects other areas too.

Check out the list of options below, which were taken from a variety of sources and sorted into 6 categories. Choose one of the bulleted items on the list. Set a realistic and specific goal for yourself. You can keep returning to the list and focusing on different options.

## Ways to Boost Your Resilience<sup>9-13</sup>

### 1. Be Clear on Your Meaning and Purpose

- Be absolutely clear on what gives you a sense of meaning and purpose. What are your core values? What do you want from your life, right now, even as this pandemic causes us to do a lot of soul-searching? Resilience increases if you have a clear sense of your moral compass.
- Choose something you can do to bring yourself closer to what really matters to you. That may be serving others, connecting even more with someone or something you love, or trying a new experience.

### 2. Focus on How You Think

- Being mindful – paying attention in the present moment, nonjudgmentally – allows you to decide if your thought patterns help or hinder your resistance. Explore ways you can be more mindful, like taking time each day to contemplate, reflect, and/or meditate.
- Notice your thinking patterns. Is it possible to reframe how you think about an event or a challenge?
  - Resilient people engage in self-discovery.



- They think about what they have learned from life's challenges.
- They work hard to keep things in perspective and to be accepting of change.
- They notice if they get caught up in unhealthy thought patterns, like seeing everything in black and white, or always assuming the worst, or blaming themselves too easily if something goes wrong.
- Practice improvising, or problem solving "on the spot."

### 3. Be Aware of Feelings

- Be mindful about your emotional responses. People who are resilient are more skillful with emotional regulation – they experience negative feelings, but they don't get consumed by them. They control their feelings, not the other way around.
- Facing your fears helps you become more resilient.
- Improve your outlook. People who are optimistic tend to do better in many ways, and it is possible to cultivate optimism with practice.
- Humor means more resilience too.

### 4. Be Kind to Yourself

- Better self-esteem is linked to more resilience. List what you like about yourself.
- Identify and enhance your signature strengths and superpowers
- Practice self-compassion. Notice self-criticism and negate it.
- Practice excellent self-care. This includes physical fitness, stress management, good sleep, finding meaning and purpose, good nutrition, healthy connections, etc.
- Work with stress. Notice it, and have several ways to work with it. Mind-body tools like journaling or breathing exercises can help.

### 5. Train and Prepare

- Practice and plan ahead so you feel able to respond and deal with crises. Run scenarios in your mind and ask yourself, "What would I do if..."
- Be aware of what triggers unhealthy behavior patterns, like substance use, overeating, and so on. Replace harmful behaviors or coping mechanisms with healthy ones

### 6. Reach Out

- Stay connected. Ask for help, be it from professionals or loved ones.
- Consider joining a support group.
- Choose some resilient role models you can learn from.
- Volunteering boosts resilience – ask how can you serve others.
- Set goals – what is one thing I can accomplish today
- Connect through spirituality and religion in a way that honors your personal beliefs.



**For more information:**

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	A variety of handouts on mindful awareness	<a href="https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/">https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/</a>
Whole Health Institute	Whole Health resources	Coming Soon!

*This guide was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original created in March 2020 by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MD, Medical Director of University of Wisconsin's Integrative Health Program, through the support of the Whole Health Institute.*

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