

# Discovering Your Resilience Core

By Gail M. Wagnild, PhD, RN, LAC

Most of us are ordinary people. However, every one of us has extraordinary possibilities and strengths. Everyone stumbles and falls from time to time, but each of us has the capability to get back up and carry on. We call this ability to get up and get going *resilience*.

Once we understand how to respond to challenges in life with resilience, downturns are not so overwhelming, defeating, or destructive. Resilient people respond to life's challenges with courage and emotional stamina, even when they are afraid. Downturns become challenges to face head-on and overcome. Even though we have no control over many events in our life—accidents, natural disasters, crime, illness, the economy, etc.—we can control how we *respond* to these events, and we can choose to do so with resilience.

Does resilience really matter? Is it really important? After years of research into resilience, and having heard from thousands of individuals about their own resilience, it is becoming increasingly clear that resilience is very important to a person's health, both mental and physical. Our own research has shown that resilience protects against (and reverses) depression, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and other negative emotions, and thus has the potential to reduce their associated physiological effects.

You can strengthen your resilience by enhancing your *resilience core*, which is made up of the five essential characteristics of resilience:

1. Meaningful life (purpose)
2. Perseverance
3. Self reliance
4. Equanimity
5. Coming home to yourself (existential aloneness)

We will discuss each of these characteristics and discuss ways to strengthen your resilience below.

If you have not yet measured the strength of your resilience core using the Resilience Scale, please take a few minutes to do so now, then come back and continue from this point. This knowledge will make the following paragraphs more relevant to you. Go to [http://www.resiliencescale.com/en/rstest/rstest\\_14\\_en.html](http://www.resiliencescale.com/en/rstest/rstest_14_en.html) and follow the instructions there.

### Meaningful Life (Purpose)

Having a sense of one's own meaning or purpose in life is probably the most important characteristic of resilience, because it provides the foundation for the other four characteristics. Life without purpose is futile and aimless. It can be difficult to get up in the morning if there is no good reason to do so. Purpose provides the driving force in life. When we experience inevitable difficulties, our purpose pulls us forward.

Despite the popular self-help literature that emphasizes 'finding your purpose,' rarely is a person's purpose lost or hidden. Our purpose typically finds us, not the other way around. Becoming aware of your purpose is straightforward. Rather than spending a lot of time and energy turning over every stone to find your purpose, pay attention to what you are called to do every day, and your purpose will soon show itself. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What do I do that others value?
2. In what ways am I needed every day, and by whom?
3. What in my life has the most meaning?

### Perseverance

The determination to keep going despite difficulties, discouragement, and disappointment...that's perseverance. Winston Churchill said it best: 'Never give in, never give in...never, never, never, never give in...' (Churchill, 1941). Lance Armstrong, the bicyclist who overcame cancer to win the Tour de France many times said, 'We have two options, medically and emotionally: give up, or fight like hell.'

Repeated failure or rejection (and the discouragement that follows) can be formidable roadblocks in life. They can prevent us from moving forward and attaining our goals. Resilient individuals are good at overcoming roadblocks. They tend to finish what they begin. Because of this, you can depend on them. If they say they are going to do something, they do it.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back when knocked down, and this takes perseverance. It is always tempting to give up, or take the easy path. It takes courage and emotional stamina to fight the good fight, and resilient people clearly demonstrate this ability. Establishing and adhering to a routine is one way to strengthen perseverance. Setting realistic goals and attaining them builds perseverance.

In order to understand your level of perseverance, you might ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I finish what I begin?
2. How often am I defeated before I even try?
3. Do others say I give up too quickly?
4. Am I able to stay focused on my goals, or am I easily distracted?

### Equanimity

Some people dwell on disappointments, are weighed down with regrets, or tend to turn everything bad that happens in their life into a catastrophe. They have a skewed and 'out of balance' view of life. Equanimity means balance and harmony. Resilient people learn to avoid extreme responses and 'sit loose in the saddle.'

Resilient people understand that 'it is an ill wind that blows no good.' Life is neither all good nor all bad. People who respond with resilience recognize this and are open to many possibilities. This is one of the reasons resilient people are described as optimistic, because even when the situation looks doubtful, they are probably on the lookout for opportunities. Resilient people have also learned to draw on their own and others' experiences and wisdom, and to use this to guide their responses. Equanimity also manifests itself in humor. Resilient individuals can laugh at themselves and their circumstances.

Do you have equanimity? Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I see the glass as half-full or half-empty?
2. Do I look back on my life with so many regrets that I find it difficult to move on?
3. Do I tend to create catastrophes from even the small things that happen in my life?
4. Would my family and close friends describe me as an optimist or a pessimist?

### Self Reliance

Self-reliance is a belief in yourself, with a clear understanding of your capabilities and limitations. It comes from experience and the 'practice, practice, practice' that leads to confidence in your abilities.

Throughout our lifetime, we encounter challenges that we meet successfully. At other times, we fail. Self-reliant individuals have learned from these experiences and have developed many problem-solving skills. Furthermore, they use, adapt, strengthen, and refine these skills throughout life. This increases their self-reliance.

In order to understand your own self-reliance, answer these questions:

1. Am I aware of all the things that I do well?
2. Do others who know me well describe me as a capable person?
3. Can I usually think through a problem and work out a good solution?
4. Can I do what needs to be done in an emergency, or will I fall apart?

### Coming Home to Yourself (Existential Aloneness)

While we all live in the world with other people, resilient individuals learn to live with themselves. They become their own best friends. This is what ‘coming home to yourself’ means. We must face alone much of what we face in life; if we are content with ourselves, this is easier. Coming home is a journey that begins with getting to know yourself well. Along the way, you become ‘comfortable in your own skin.’

Being existentially alone does not deny the importance of shared experiences, nor does it demean significant and close relationships with others. It does mean that you must accept yourself as you are, warts and all.

Most of us are ordinary people going about ordinary lives, but each of us is unique. We have much to contribute to the world around us. Many people fail to recognize this about themselves and are filled with despair. A resilient individual will recognize his or own worth.

Resilient people will also realize that they are in a class of their own and do not feel a pressure to conform. They are able to ‘go it alone’ if necessary.

Ask yourself the following questions to see if you are comfortable in your own skin:

1. Am I willing to take a course of action that I know to be right, but which is unpopular with my peers?
2. As I look back at my life, what sets me apart from everyone else?
3. Am I comfortable with whom I have become?

### In Conclusion

Each of us has extraordinary possibilities and strengths. Each of us has the capability to get back up and carry on, whether we use it or not. This is resilience. Resilient people have courage and emotional stamina. They respond to challenges in an effective way. You can become more resilient.

Resilience matters. It is important. Resilience is very important to a person’s mental and physical health. Resilience protects against (and reverses) depression, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and other negative emotions, and thus has the potential to reduce their associated physiological effects. Being more resilient improves the quality of life.

Understand your resilience core, know where it is weak, take steps to strengthen it, and then go forward boldly and live resiliently.