

AKTIVE

# Resilience

Through the

Storms



# Resilience

We have all had our fair share of stress, change and ambiguity for the longest time. Invariably, our mettle has been tested and if the last 48 hours with Gabrielle alone have anything to teach us, this is not our last tango dance with change, ambiguity, and unpredictability.

A few of us may be directly affected. Yet we are all likely to feel impacted on some level- whether we are at the epicentre of impact or adjacent to it through the stories we hear on the news or from those around us. Whilst we are all made of resilience, it is not an infinite resource. Our resilience requires conscious, deliberate nurturing.

***Stress takes you as it finds you!*** So that we recover and grow, we must maintain and grow our resilience resources.

*The good news?* Resilience is best built when tested. No matter how depleted we may feel, it is often when we feel most challenged that we can grow our resilience for whatever is to come ahead. Resilience is not about ‘handling’ and it requires more than just grit. Resilience is the capacity to select what, when and how we engage with, to pivot to better always and to grow through every exposure.

If you are reading this as a member of the AKTIVE community, you are likely trying to find tips and tools to help those around you; the people you support and care for. It is also likely that you are a highly resilient person who has been rushing around and scooping up whatever resources you could get to in navigating the challenges unfolding around you. The basic set of references I have prepared for you will help you help others. *So that you are best positioned to aid those around you, you must start with yourself!*

We all have abundance of innate resilience. Challenges such as the recent floods and the cyclone we are navigating can be depleting, disorienting, disheartening. Doubly so on the back of a tricky COVID journey that is still unfolding for so many. We are all designed to deal with spikes of change and stress, but we have and continue to manage the effects of prolonged, cumulative exposures to stress. The sticky, icky kind of stress the effects of which linger way past the event that has triggered it. It is safe to say that our recent challenges come with an added kick too. As far as stress and change go, these have been of the spikiest kind – unprecedented.

If you are like many of the remarkable individuals and teams I work with, it would be normal to notice loss of focus and concentration, inability to make decisions, difficulty committing attention to anything that doesn't appear imminent; irritability, frustration, sadness, loss of patience, overwhelm, depression and anxiety. The list of responses is as varied as there are humans. Most of these may be what we call



Dynamic, quick and intense changes in the environment. The challenge is unexpected or unstable and may be of unknown duration



A lack of predictability around issues and events. The nature of the event may be known, but it is impossible to predict its presence or outcomes in advance



The combination of issues and the chaos that surrounds any organisation. The situation has many interconnected parts and variables. Some information may be available or could be predicted, but the volume or nature of it can be too overwhelming to process



The haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions. Causal relationships are completely unclear. No precedents exist; you face 'unknown unknowns'

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'normal responses to an abnormal situation'. They may remain normal for some time, doubly so when we have managed abnormal for so long.

Most of us have muddled through, grinded, and coped through VUCA times in the past. Grit is not enough especially if we are leading outcomes involving others. Every single one of us is wired to handle and to demonstrate some level of grit but that is not where resilience lies. Most of us will make it through this challenge. The question is, how well? Bouncing back is not enough doubly so when the thing we aim to bounce back to may no longer be there.

Every indication is that VUCA is here to stay. The adage of 'the only certainty is uncertainty' has certainly been proven of recent. We all have an abundance of capabilities to survive. But many are poor at meeting their capacity to thrive; not despite but because of the challenges that we have confronted. We can thrive rather than just survive, and we can certainly do that with a greater ease. We can go beyond 'normal in abnormal' and go for optimal.

The best news is that it is easier to sustain and fuel our resilience than it seems. It is certainly easier to sustain resilience that trying to recover it once we have depleted our resilience.

By now, we have all drafted a map of how we may navigate the journey to recovery from the floods. However, the map is not the territory! We are tested when we navigate the ground, in bright day light of the occasional respite and lulls - frustration around inevitable delays, the disappointment of things not materialising the way in which we intended, the effects of burnout and the complexity of dealing with different responses to the same event.

## The ABCD to Resilience

Resilience for recovery, growth and thriving follows a sequence, a rhythm – **a**wareness, **b**elonging, **c**uriosity and **d**rive. Resilience is in developing clearer **a**wareness, deeper **b**elonging, broader **c**uriosity, and stronger **d**rive.



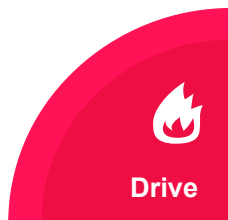
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The ABCD to resilience is not a linear process or a one-of journey. It requires you to pause, notice what is needed most, engage, evaluate, and re-engage again. Be that in leading self or leading others, it demands the discipline to Notice, Decide and Act.

## DRIVE

Let's start with the end in mind- Drive. To make it through any challenge longer than a second, we must be able to sustain our drive. When driven, a setback becomes an opportunity to pause and reflect; the seemingly impossible becomes plausible because we can build better.



There are two rules to drive for resilience:

1. You must maintain your equilibrium, unapologetically.
- And
2. Purpose proceeds drive.

### Rule #1: Maintain your equilibrium

There are no shortcuts or tricks we can play to maintain our resilience when we are tested. Not even Elon Musk can run a vehicle on empty. To make it through the marathon of the current challenge, we must **refuel and refuel** with the right stuff. ***The minute you stop focusing on your wellbeing, you become an ill being.***

Maintaining focus on the essentials is important, always. When we are tackling ongoing challenges or unfolding crisis it becomes critical! The essentials include adequate **sleep** and sleep hygiene, healthy **diet, hydration, and exercise**. If you are thinking- 'That's old news' and 'I have no time for this', I challenge you to *make these essentials your priority*. Our brains are wired to make the crises our focal point, to keep us on high alert. This may be ok until the crisis is over. Unless we consciously manage ourselves and resources, we may stay on high alert as the impact of crises unfolds. Remaining in this state for too long is a shortcut to disaster- it leads to chronic stress. To see, think, reason, and engage appropriately through and following a crisis we must be at our best.

No matter how sophisticated and intricate our life has become, we are still reading challenges and change as if a wild bear is coming to get us. The Fight-Flight-Freeze (FFF) response kicks in, making

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us alert, shutting our digestive system, seeing us reaching for unhealthy sugar rush; our sleep goes by the wayside because we stay 'wired'; we shift from calm breathing to shallow, rapid breath. After all, we don't want to be found snoozing, meditating, or munching on berries when chased by a bear.

The challenges we are dealing with are not the quick sprint kind. They are ultramarathons. It takes effort and commitment to remind ourselves that to make it through, we must sustain ourselves. Think of it this way – **when managing crisis, the quality of your well-being directly translates into the quality of your decisions.** Here is what happens in a little more detail, when under stress:

- Blood rushes away from non-essential systems (e.g., digestive system shuts down) so that your major muscle groups (responsible for running away from or punching the bear) can keep your precious resources for emergencies. Hence, you may get 'the chills', butterflies in your stomach or tense muscles after the event.
- Brain functions get re-organised so that things that don't fit the perceived threat or the imminent, suddenly begin to feel insignificant. Sadly, this explains why we find ourselves catching up on critical admin long after it was due or far worse- rebuilding vital relationships we have sacrificed whilst fighting that imaginary 'wild bear'.
- The body over-generates the chemicals designed to heal us faster, should we get injured. This is the reason why we often fall sick the minute we go on holiday after a demanding stint. There is only that much of that stuff to go around, and our body signals we have been running on empty as soon as it feels safe to do so.

It is far harder to recover once we have lost our balance than to maintain it as we go.

When our bodies and minds are depleted and fully focused on crisis, we are wired to find reasons to worry even when the immediate threat is no longer there. We ruminate on what has been long after the event is over and worry about what is to come. *To make the right calls for what is ahead, we need to be able to take our strongest stance.* To shift our minds to exploring better ways towards recovery, we must remind our bodies that it is safe for us to seek better. The best way to do this is by regulating healthy sleep, diet, and movement. So how do you interrupt the effects of FFF for the benefit of broader, richer, more deliberate engagement with opportunities for recovery?

1. Make your list of 'Things Done' at the end of the day before you focus on writing your 'To do' list for tomorrow. Focus on what you have achieved however small your achievements may seem. Remind yourself that you have control over whatever it is you are experiencing.
2. Prioritise sleep! This includes:
  - a. Minimise exposure to screens before bedtime to give your brain a chance to catch up with your tired body.
  - b. Minimise demands on your body, by eating and drinking way in advance of your bedtime.
  - c. Trigger relaxation as needed, by practicing bedtime breathing or meditation.
3. Make time for exercise. Ten minutes will do if you are stretched for time. The goal is to move intentionally, shift some of the stress-inducing chemicals traveling around your body, build back strength and remind yourself you have control in any situation.

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4. Whilst it is essential for our capacity to thrive always, **healthy diet** is critical in times of pressure, if only because it supports healthy immune system and the repair of damaged cells. Coincidentally, when you integrate healthy diet and mindful eating into your day, you give your brain a chance to accept that the wild bear is not a real threat and that you are safe to explore options ahead.

**Rule #2: Purpose proceeds drive** but that's not any old purpose. Your resilience can only be sustained by the kind of purpose you deeply align with; that sustains our hopes and motivations; that fuels and defines you. Many of us can sustain and are sustained by commitment to our purpose. When we battle the unrelenting grind of yet another unprecedented challenge, some of us can become disillusioned whilst others might experience a change of priorities. To sustain your resilience, pause, reflect, and appreciate how your actions and efforts support the purpose that drives you. Reconnect with your purpose if your motivation is depleted or be prepared to change if your priorities have evolved. Whatever it is that you do, don't linger in-between. Find your purpose, even if it is your purpose for the next few minutes; lock into it, shift or change something, anything for the better and acknowledge your capacity to persevere.

## AWARENESS

Resilience demands we maintain awareness of ourselves, of others around us and of our context. Not as we wish it to be or assume it is, but as it is – warts and all. This means we recognise when our reactions or patterns of engagement with our environment may be sub-optimal, notice when our inbuilt or habitual responses may take away more than they deliver, and shift towards more adaptive, optimal responses. Starting with self-awareness, we need to remember that *stress takes us as it finds us*. To maintain and grow our resilience in this ultramarathon that recovery will demand, we need to be able to pause and pause again, check for and respond to our needs as they evolve and change.

Whether this be awareness of self or others, the practice of awareness for resilience is as simple as asking these two questions:

- *How am I/are you?*
- *How am I/are you, really?*

When we are on the battlefield with stress, it may seem like we don't have the time or resources to pay attention to the responses to these questions. However, the only test that needs to be met (as one of my clinical coaches once called it) is 'the test of an averagely good human'. Acknowledgement, a pause in time, recognition of your own or another's experience, a hot cup of tea may be all that is needed in the moment. That moment of demonstrating awareness can be the difference between thriving and barely surviving or losing the battle with stress.





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A note here- the feeling of intrinsic overwhelm can be as real as the impact of the storm for so many. The easiest way to spot overwhelm is when you catch yourself thinking - 'I don't know where to start'; 'I don't know what to do next'. If that's the case- pause, acknowledge that this is a normal response but pick something, anything to shift and change. Commit to an action in the direction of improving your predicament. Anything, as little as it may seem shifts you away from the feeling of overwhelm. It gives you back a sense of control and influence.

I also have a heuristic for you, a rule of thumb when it comes to awareness for resilience:

### ***'Mind where your mind goes'***

Stress is designed to focus our attention on the worst-case scenario. Focus on this for too long and you may miss a better way out. To make it through, recover and grow through this challenge, we need to focus on the possibilities and the opportunities ahead. If you find yourself engulfed by the negative accept that this is normal but remember- given the chance this too shall pass. Give yourself the opportunity to accept that this is a moment in time. No matter how challenging this moment is, a better moment will come, eventually. Practice focusing on what you hope to get to rather than what you are aiming to avoid. Find space for humour and connection- that's the gold dust!

Resilience is often the by-product of a string of small wins; tiny, deliberate changes that collectively create tectonic power shifts. Most of us are wired to do the heroic when a crisis hits. However, the stresses that deplete our resilience are less about the moment of crisis and more about the debris it leaves behind. The most dangerous debris are the ones that we leave lodged within ourselves- the unmet needs, the unresolved conflicts or frustrations, the missed opportunities to pause, recharge and re-engage. In the military we speak of these as the pebble in our shoe. At first, they can be something you notice but can move ahead with. No matter how tiny it is, you cannot run a marathon with a pebble in your shoe without feeling the pain. Unless you pause and shake that grit out of your shoe, it will eat away at your resilience. Pause! Recognise your need or the needs of others. Acknowledge that need and find a way to refuel hope, even if it is for a moment. Resilience is built through the string of micro moments when we chose to persevere towards better. However small these moments may be, they count. This brings me to the next step- Belonging.

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## BELONGING

### Belonging



Resilience demands we maintain or create access to enabling belonging – a reference we hold within ourselves that sees us worthy of taking on the challenge. A sense of belonging to our strengths, our potential for good, our worth – this is vital for resilience because belonging shapes the power and direction of our engagement with our predicament. Crises push us off balance. They focus us on the imminent, sometimes at the expense of the constant. To make it through this and do so resiliently, it is vital you ground yourself in whatever it is that fuels your sense of belonging. *Belonging is what gravity is to an astronaut. Without it, we drift aimlessly and off course.* Whether this be your family, your community of faith, your friends, your neighbours- be clear on and maintain your connection to your source of belonging. I have another heuristic or a rule of thumb for you here:

**‘Belong and make better’.** When the pressure is on and you feel depleted, find a way to improve another’s lot. A kind word, a moment of compassion, a small action can be all that it takes to help another. The payback for you is ten-fold. It reminds you that even when you are depleted you have the power to improve. Remember though, fuel yourself first.

## CURIOSITY

Resilience demands capabilities; however, the most important capability is one we all have access to- curiosity. Curiosity can transform a sense of doom and woe into wonder, fear into focus on possibilities, rumination into anticipation. It allows us to seek rather than avoid challenges, and to transform the unsettling into exciting. The rule here is simple- *wonder more and you will worry less.* Allow yourself to explore and tap into opportunities. It is difficult to be stressed out and curious at the same time. Curiosity is the state we need to envision better ways forward. This may be in our own ways of engaging with the predicament, how we respond or react to others or how we tackle the complex strategic challenges in navigating recovery. Curiosity invites you to observe from some distance whilst remaining engaged with the proposition of the moment.

### Capabilities



our own



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This cadence to resilience – ABCD – applies to us all, yet we are all unique. To make it through challenges and ultimately thrive, we need to understand and create the precise conditions for our own resilience. The conditions we need to nurture our strengths and potential as we navigate this challenge may vary in detail from person to person, across teams, communities, and organisations. But they may also change for each of us, as our circumstances shift. The blueprint is much the same.

Pay attention, seek to understand, explore, and reach out for what fuels you uniquely. Know the conditions that sustain your resilience. If we cannot find them in the form you are familiar with, reach out for the healthy proximate. Connect, communicate, collaborate. No matter how complex the challenge may seem, to tackle it you need to mind the fundamentals. Pause often, breath deeply, focus on your well-being, fuel connections.

Keep thriving,

Dr Alia Bojilova

