



The Practice of Resilience

Why resilience is a state achieved through deliberate practice, not a quality one either has or does not.

How to build it, strengthen it, and deploy it when needed.

The Practice of Resilience.

How to build resilience through deliberate practice.

Resilience as one of the five arenas of physical health.

Stressors are inevitable in life. Some are good stressors that force us to grow and develop through challenge. Some are stressors we actively seek out; like training, having children and learning new skills. Other stressors are unwanted, and create the stress we feel and experience as stressful. For decades now, research has confirmed that the amount of stress a person experiences has a direct impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. However, interestingly, it is not the amount of stress a person has in their life that determines the strength and extent of this impact, but rather the person's perception of, and reaction to, that stress.

In the early 2000s much research was completed on telomeres that illustrated this impact and nuance. Telomeres are to our chromosomes what aglets are to our shoelaces, (aglets, for those who are unfamiliar, are the small 'caps' on the end of shoelaces that stop them from fraying). Similarly, telomeres are like 'caps' on the ends of our chromosomes that stop them from fraying. As we age, and life impacts our cells and our DNA, chromosomes get damaged and fray, becoming unwrapped. The result is that they are unable to replicate with quite the same degree of accuracy. Essentially one of the big takeaways from this research was that the longer the telomeres, the younger the person is at the cellular level.

This was extremely exciting. Finally, we had a way to quantify the difference between two people with the same birthday, but who appeared to be very different ages. The distinction between chronological age and biological age was born. But it took a further realisation to understand what accounted for these observably different, and now quantifiable differences in biological age.

Enter telomerase. Telomerase is the enzyme that repairs a telomere. The more telomerase a person makes, the more rapidly we can restore telomeres and the slower we age. Now we had a mechanism by which we could predict how quickly a person was ageing. The implication was obvious: what can we do to make more telomerase? Alternatively, what are we doing that is causing us to make less than the ideal amount?

Stress turned out to be a big part of the answer. Findings showed that the more stress a person experienced the less telomerase they made and the more quickly they aged. In fact, one study suggested that for every year spent under chronic stress, a person would age six years at the cellular level!

What was even more insightful than this, however, was that it was not the objective amount of stress experienced that made the difference. but rather the way that stress was experienced and perceived by the person on the receiving end. For example, two people caring for a disabled child could experience this hardship very differently. One person might see it as a noble and worthy calling; caring for someone they loved immensely who had tough challenges to face. The other could view it as a great hardship and a trial to be endured that had been imposed on them through some cruel twist of fate. Over the course of years, the person viewing their life as a worthy calling should make more telomerase and age slower. As the body of research grew, the picture became more and more clear. The stress you endured mattered way less (from a health perspective) than how you perceived and dealt with that stress.

As is often the case, this confirmed what ancient wisdom had known for centuries. To encapsulate it into a single maxim: "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you choose to deal with it".

From a cold, hard, biological perspective, this is a truism. But from a compassionate, real-life perspective, I accept that this is much messier, so I want to take a moment to qualify this statement.

Conservative perspectives advocating personal responsibility might seize upon this statement and read it as though I am saying, quite cruelly, that all suffering and hardship is the fault of the owner and thus their sole responsibility to sort out or be less bothered by it.

I am not saying this at all and I don't believe it. As I write this, millions of people have been displaced, and thousands killed by a senseless war in Ukraine. They did not choose this suffering and, clearly, losing loved ones, being separated from your children, having your home bombed and facing mortal danger is harrowing and beyond the type of stress most humans deal with under any normal circumstances.

Stressors will present themselves in our lives. If we are lucky they will not take the form of war but when they do appear, our preparedness and resilience will be tested. Our readiness will determine, in large part, not only the impact of the ordeal on our wellbeing, but how well we cope practically, emotionally, mentally and physically. As we will discuss, one of the bedrock elements of resilience is social support. We are a social ape and a creature that relies on our tribe for survival. A single human is not a strong creature, and we scale in our effectiveness the more of us there are. A single human lacks the agency of a whole tribe, which in turn can achieve nothing in comparison to humanity as a whole. We are stronger together in almost every way. With social support at the bedrock of resilience, I urge you not only to think about your own social support network, which you will lean on when rough times befall you, but also to think of for whom you can be that support network. Who can you be there for? That might mean domestically; supporting a sibling through a breakup. Or that might mean internationally, helping refugees escape madness.

So, yes, how you perceive stress is hugely important. But if we view our fellow humans with compassion we can see that, often people suffer so that they cannot alter their thinking, shoulder their burdens or see a silver lining. If you find your companions in this world in such a spot, refrain from judgements and be there for them and with them. We are all in this together.

If stressors are inevitable, The way we face them is the key to whether our health is unaffected or badly affected. As such, I see great utility in investing time and resources into building resilience. After all, many of the stressors we face are well outside our control. As I write this in 2022 we have recently exited a COVID pandemic that changed our lives and decimated my business, there are conflicts abroad that have potentially global ramifications, my wife has endured a mystery lung disease for nearly three years, My father-in-law's house was broken into last week, and a plane crashed in China killing 130+ people today.

None of these events are within my control, and trying to exert my will on the current situation is futile. But each day, week, and month, I try to build and maintain resilience. I do this so that I can handle, as best as I can the inevitable stressors that land in my lap, for the sake of all who rely on me.

Resilience is a practice.

Here is a graph of the google stats for the search term "Resilience" before, and just as, the pandemic took hold in the UK. Looking up how to become more resilient when suffering has already taken hold of you is like pricing up insurance when you've just had a car accident. This perspective of resilience suggests it is seen as a reactive act; As though somehow resilience is a thing you can access when needed without cultivating it beforehand. On the contrary, resilience is a quality you grow and tend to in everyday life, even when it seems you are not in need of it. In this way, I think of resilience very much as I think of the other five arenas of physical health. It is a complex and nuanced state that is constantly in flux. Building and maintaining your resilience so that you can call upon it when needed is a perennial practice; part of curating your way of life so that you have the resources you need when the need arises, much as you might train in the gym so that you have strength when needed.

The following discussion of resilience splits the aspects of building our own practice into three sections. The first section is what I have called bedrock. These are the two most fundamental

elements of building resilience: Sleep and connection, or social support. In the same way that you can build a house on soft ground but, in doing so, sacrifice robustness, you can also build a degree of resilience without these two elements, but at the expense of the robustness of the state. So often one or both of these factors are fundamentally compromised in our modern lives. Building some of the later practices into your life before tending to these basics can help, but never as much as it would if you were building them on solid bedrock.

The second section is titled principle foundations. These are the principles that one must attend to during restful, or normal, times to cultivate the foundations of resilience in anticipation of tough times that may arise. Following on from this section is “reactive foundations”. These are the principles one will need once hardship has presented itself. These are intended to be deployed when reacting to and dealing with stressors is needed. Finally, there is a menu of practices that time and science have demonstrated to be of great utility. It is not my intention for you to feel obligated to utilise all of these. Nor is the list exhaustive. Think of this section as a menu of options to help you get started in implementing your journey towards greater resilience.

Bedrock: Sleep & Connection.

Sleep and social connection/support are the bedrock of resilience. Without these two pieces in place, weathering the inevitable stressors you encounter in life is far harder.

Sleep.

Sleep is the single most effective way the body can rejuvenate itself. When you sleep your brain cleans itself physically, restores neurotransmitters and processes recent events, including stressors. Adequate quality sleep is essential for a level of readiness suitable for dealing with stressors that may present the following day. Unfortunately, when we feel stressed, sleep is negatively affected, when our sleep is negatively affected our ability to deal with stress is diminished and a vicious cycle ensues.

Here is a short list of how chronically poor sleep diminishes your capacity to deal with stress.

Poor sleep makes you perceive more stress than you otherwise might. Remember earlier on when I said that stress isn't necessarily the problem and that, instead, the problem is how we perceive and react to it? Well, the area of your brain that senses stress and lights up when it perceives a threat is the amygdala. When your sleep is poor in quantity and or quality, your amygdala will be more reactive, perceiving more stress and reacting more strongly to those perceived stressors. One example that highlights this is the way you perceive faces when sleep deprived. There are a huge range of emotions the human face can express. Imagine these on a spectrum ranging from negative emotions like anger to positive ones like joy, with neutral emotions like apathy and boredom sitting in the middle. When sleep deprived you are more likely to perceive neutral faces as aggressive or threatening. Imagine this effect playing out over the course of a whole day, week, or month! The amount of threat you would perceive and respond to on a deep physiological level would be significantly higher than you would experience had those days followed quality sleep. This will have an impact on the quality of your personal relationships among many other factors in your personal and work life.

Poor sleep decreases your willpower. Willpower is like a muscle. It is trainable but also subject to fatigue. We use willpower all day long. Don't shout at that junior employee for making the mistake. Don't fire off an emotional email to a colleague who frustrated you. Don't eat the cookie. When sleep-deprived your willpower is diminished. Couple that with the aforementioned increase in perceived stress and you have a recipe for compounding your stress. You are more likely to act in ways that create yet more stress for your future self to deal with.

Poor sleep decreases productivity. Your per-hour productivity drops when sleep deprived due to lowered ability to concentrate, lowered motivation, and reduced capacity to be creative, but you will also choose easier tasks like checking email over harder ones like strategic thinking. This may again compound your stress by making you fall behind. The second and third-order consequences of this could be quite meaningful. Common examples include less leisure time, quality time with family and work seeping into areas of your life that have deeply negative consequences. It is almost always a false economy to sacrifice sleep in the name of productivity, or just about anything else, other than survival.

When well rested, we have our full capacity. When sleep deprived, our capacity is compromised in myriad ways. This problem is insidious. Sleep-deprived people do not know they are more irritable, less productive, quicker to anger, perceive more stress and battle reduced willpower. You cannot perceive mild sleep deprivation or the hindrance it places on your life. Maintaining enough quality and quantity of sleep requires conscious tending. That said, obsessing about sleep quality will likely produce anxiety, which is a wrecking ball for sleep quality. Thus we must be mindful of our sleep quality while avoiding obsession and worry. In the interest of giving practical advice on how to achieve this balance, allow me to just state that big-picture focus is useful here. One night of sleeplessness, one all-nighter or a few days of early starts will not leave you a babbling reactive mess. But a week where you average less than six hours a night will compromise cognitive capacity and diminish productivity and resilience.

Social Connection

Humans are social apes. Alone, we are extremely vulnerable and, for our ancestors, survival was best ensured by our tribes. A single wild human is a comparatively weak creature. We have no fangs, powerful jaws or claws. We're relatively slow, weak and soft-skinned when compared to the predators of the ancient savannah. But our ancestors found strength in numbers. Learning to be a social, cooperative species allowed us to better navigate our evolutionary landscapes, survive and thrive to become the dominant species we are today. A single human is vulnerable and ill-equipped to survive for long in the wild. But a tribe of humans that care deeply about each other and work in cooperation is strong, resilient and formidable.

As such, we have evolved to not only thrive in close-knit groups but to rely on being part of one. Our brains are evolved to foster, maintain, value and protect social connections. The stress response to social isolation, exile, humiliation and diminishing of our social status is evidence of the severity with which we perceive those events. Essentially, the prospect of being socially humiliated or cast out from your group is met with the same stress response as being threatened with a knife. Getting cast out from our tribe in ancient times was a death sentence, and our brains still see it that way.

This is the first way in which social connection is vital for true resilience. In a strictly self-preservation context, a human will be more stressed and vulnerable if they feel alone than they would if they had a strong group, held by strong bonds, to weather the storm with them. This is true, regardless of the stressor.

The second way in which social connection strengthens our resilience is when we actually use it. When faced with a challenge we turn to our trusted friends and family for their practical value, making use of their experience, sage advice or practical help. But there is a deeper phenomenon at play. Simply being able to share your experience, worry, anxiety, anger, etc with another human being, and having them hold that for you for a while, can offer profound relief from suffering. There is an entire body of literature, for example, on a therapy called peer support. In peer support, instead of a clinician being the sole source of support for a patient, peers who have similar shared life experiences are provided to simply share the experience alongside the person. They are not there to give advice, treatment, or even sympathy. But the simple act of talking with, or even just sitting with, a person who has been through the same challenges, and sharing, on equal footing, your own experience has enormous therapeutic value.

I think we have all experienced this before. Say you are experiencing a breakup. You are emotionally torn, maybe even heartbroken, and you might feel betrayed or devalued. You speak to one friend who is full of advice and well-intentioned phrases like 'they weren't right for you anyway' or 'there's plenty more fish...'. Then you speak to another friend who sits with you, validates your pain, doesn't try to fix it (or you) or offer unsolicited advice. Who would you rather be supported by? I think of it as being like a person supporting you if you had broken your leg and were awaiting an ambulance. In that situation, few people would try to intervene as they would be aware that there was nothing they could do. But, regardless, we instinctively know their presence would comfort us regardless of their lack of utility. Imagine how much more the pain would hurt and the fear would grip you if they left you alone in such a vulnerable state. And imagine how annoying it would be for them to say "at least your other leg is ok". That is exactly the point of

social connection. For emotional and physical wellbeing, having people around us who have 'got our backs' makes all challenges less daunting and more surmountable.

A personal example I can share with you involves a story of when my close friends came to my aid and I honestly do not know what I would have done without them. I woke one morning feeling a little dizzy. I didn't think much of it and drove my children to school and nursery. By lunchtime I had full-blown vertigo and could not sit upright without vomiting. This happened, by coincidence, to be a day when my wife was in bed with pneumonia, and could not even make it to the shower unaided. I didn't know how I would get the kids from nursery/school, let alone bath them and take care of my wife. Over the next four days, the following people came to our aid.

- The next-door neighbour collected medication, food and supplies from the shop.
- My friend drove my kids to nursery and school and picked them up.
- The children's godparents. did the same and took the kids to the park.
- Nursery staff bent over backwards to get the kids in extra days and even strapped the kids in the car to save me from getting out.
- Grandparents helped with childcare and took care of my son.
- My staff picked up extra shifts and responsibilities to allow me to not worry about work.

There are more examples, but I hope I've made my point. Without deep social connections, these people would not have come to my aid, and I would have struggled and suffered so much more. This example is one where the support was quite practical, but examples abound of times when a beer with a friend who could do nothing for my problem helped ease the tension greatly.

Look closely, and there is another layer to this principle. In the example above, I show how friends came to my aid when I was suffering. But I was also there for my wife and kids when they needed me. I still had to bathe and bed the children alone as my wife could not help. I remember sitting on my toddler's floor getting him to sleep; using all my willpower not to vomit on his bed. The moment he was asleep I literally crawled to the bathroom and vomited so violently I hit my head on the basin and was lucky not to knock myself out. I was able to get through this experience, not because I am tough, but because I cared so much about those I was doing it for.

Resilience is a two-way street. The resilience we gain from being the social connection needed for someone else is as potent as the resilience we gain from them being there for us. The more deeply connected with a person we are, the more likely they are to come to our aid, yes. But also the more likely we are to come to theirs. What's more is that the more deeply connected with someone we are, the more we can bear on their behalf. Social connections make us more resilient when we receive support, and when we support others.

It is true that we are more vulnerable without meaningful social connection to others in our lives, but we are also less strong for others. Being a strong connection for someone else is as important to our collective resilience as any other factor you could think of.

Principle Foundations: Purpose & Capacity.

Upon the bedrock of sleep and social connection sit the principle foundations of resilience. These two factors are inner qualities we can cultivate over time and build with deliberate effort. Together they make up the foundation of being ready for assaults on our equilibrium. They are purpose, and capacity.

Purpose

When we have a thing worth fighting for, striving for, defending, and truly valuing, our ability to endure hardship is greatly augmented. Simply, if you cannot answer the question "what for?" or "what's the point?" You are unlikely to endure much discomfort. Yet, when the answer to that question is obvious and strong, the rationale for endurance is equally strong. This is not simply rhetoric: scientific enquiry has highlighted the role of purpose in achievement, resilience and physical and mental health. [\[reference here\]](#)

This is such a strong characteristic of purpose that it can be highly leveraged for nefarious ends. Purpose can be leveraged to make people go to war, blow themselves up in suicide bombings, and cause harm to others. A strong purpose must be approached with caution. Assigning deep, strong, and everlasting meaning to a cause or goal can enable you to do things outside normal parameters. We each must be very careful about what in our lives we give such power. Assuming (and hoping) we are not talking about going to war or committing terror attacks, everyday miscalculations can still have negative consequences for our lives and wellbeing. For example, corporations like to instill a sense of purpose behind what the business is trying to achieve. In itself this is no bad thing - it can improve cohesiveness, increase effort and commitment from the workforce, and enhance performance and growth as a result. Often this purpose is genuine and heartfelt and makes a positive impact on the world as a result of the business's success. The cost, however, can be a level of commitment from workers that ruins personal health and family relationships. Hence my warning: Purpose is potent, aim carefully when using this tool.

With that said, and hopefully heeded, allow me to endorse a strong purpose as fully as I can. I've used personal stories sparingly to make points in this book, as it's not a book about me, but here I'll use one that is fresh in my mind.

As I write in 2022 the last two years have been extremely challenging for many of us. I was no different and had to close my business for nine out of twelve months due to COVID. At the same time and my wife and I decided to divorce. I've felt on the edge of losing it all multiple times. I've been scared, angry, frustrated and felt a deep futility I've never felt before. I have found a sense of purpose to be a great help during these times. Not only as a source of strength that helped me endure, but also as a guiding star for making decisions in the face of each challenge.

During the pandemic, I was overwhelmed when my clients offered to keep paying while we were closed. Every single one said that they wanted our gym to still be open when it was all over, and were happy to support us through the challenge. Knowing how much our small community of 40 people valued the work we do, and the special place we built, gave me a sense of purpose to endure and find a way. If their reaction had been to cancel; if they had made me feel like my team and I were just a gym or if they had been indifferent to our fate, I likely would have chosen to close up shop. The business is stronger than ever now that we understand the value our community and support bring to others, and our focus and culture have evolved to understand this and cultivate it even more.

In my personal life, my highest purpose is as a father. I want to be a father that nourishes his children and provides stability and security for them; giving them the chance to grow happily into the people they choose to become, unhindered by my baggage. This purpose has been a guiding star in my decision-making throughout the divorce. As such, when faced with a decision relating to something like making financial agreements, I can use this high purpose as a figurative 'North Star'. If part of me wants to fight a point or has a primal impulse to 'win' an argument, I can let that impulse bathe in the light of that purpose. If the action I am driven towards is in sync with that purpose, the drive will become stronger and feel right. If the two are at odds, creating friction, it feels uncomfortable, and the strength of the drive diminishes, often, just enough to avoid actions and decisions that I may later regret, as the cost to my higher purpose becomes evident.

These two examples illuminate two ways in which a clear sense of purpose can affect our resilience. Firstly, weathering storms when bolstered by a sense of purpose, especially one that originates outside our self, is easier than it is without that source of strength. The power of purpose to help us answer the question 'why am I doing this?' is actually quite profound. If there is no answer to that question, perseverance in the face of adversity is pointless. However, with a strong why, the point is self-evident. It facilitates toughness and perseverance that makes sense in one's mind, quiets the voices that tell us to quit, and speaks words of encouragement in the darkness.

Secondly, purpose helps to guide our choices. When our choices are aligned with a solid and meaningful purpose, they are clear and easier to make. Conversely, when a choice is linked to nothing of meaning, the choice doesn't matter. The brain has to weigh the balance of each choice we make and to do so it needs clear criteria. In the absence of purpose or meaning, what does it

use? I feel the likely answers are seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Hardly criteria that will guide us towards fulfilling lives we can be proud of.

There is another side to purpose I wish to touch on. While speaking at a large business I was once asked 'how do you find your purpose?'. I was taken aback by this question as it seemed to make two assumptions about purpose that I didn't hold to be true. Namely that it was singular, and also that it is to be found. I personally feel that we have a multitude of purposes rather than one single one, and these are decidedly chosen rather than being allotted by fate.

On the point about choice over destiny, I feel we each can choose to devote ourselves to any cause we see fit. I accept that the notion of complete free will is contentious, as our genes, early environment and many other factors combine to make us gravitate towards certain choices in any given situation. But to have a purpose is optional; plenty of people live without one.

To dedicate one's life to any cause requires a great deal of buy-in from the mind doing the committing, and to live with purpose requires one to be complicit in holding that purpose in mind and acting in line with it. Hence I see purpose squarely as a choice; albeit maybe a loaded one. With that said, if purpose is a choice, there are no rules to determine how many distinct purposes we can have. We each have areas of our lives we see as distinct, and there is no reason each of them has to be aligned with a singular purpose. For example, if my purpose at work is to build world-class athletes who win at the highest level, few would argue that I should hold that consistently in my family life, as it is unrelated. As such, I can choose purposes for all the different areas of my life, and weigh them as I see fit. The benefits of guiding my actions in each area, and bolstering me against trials will still hold true. By extension, I can choose to see or find purpose in everything I do. Even if the thing itself is relatively trivial, finding purpose in it is likely to improve my attentiveness, performance and satisfaction with it. For example, when I do the dishes, I do not assign grandiose meaning to the task or its outcome. But I do have an understanding that having clean dishes, a clean and tidy kitchen and an orderly home contributes to my environment being a healthy, calm place. I value living in a beautiful space which is calm and orderly, and it helps me stay healthy of body and mind and acts as a sanctuary when I am not at work. It is a small dose of purpose, a humble one, but it allows me to not resent doing the dishes at the end of the day, and to value doing a good job.

Capacity

Capacity refers to the room we have within ourselves for extra strain and demand. The well-known saying that you cannot pour from an empty cup is a great way to convey the concept of capacity. Imagine yourself as a cup of water, with each demand in your life a drain on that water. You have people who rely on you, obligations at work, and various other challenges. What is your capacity to provide and meet those demands? There are two factors at play; the size of your figurative cup, and the balance between the rate at which you pour and the rate at which you replenish the water inside.

You cannot pour from an empty cup. If you constantly nourish others and meet demands and obligations without refilling your capacity, you will eventually run dry no matter how big your cup.

In my work as a health and performance coach, I have worked with many high-performing individuals: Athletes, CEOs, Lawyers. Many of them saw themselves as the biggest cup in the world. None of them were right.

The key to understanding this concept is simply to accept that there is a limit, to how much anyone can shoulder (yes, even for you). If you want to be at your best for those who rely on you and be a source of strength when choppy waters arrive, you must preserve your capacity. Self-care is a strategy of strength and readiness. In addition, you must accept that challenges will arise. Even in the most comfortable of times, it is wise to be ready for great challenges. To return to a point I've already made; all of you reading this have just lived through the worst pandemic in over 100 years. It came fast and, for many, was unexpected. The complacency that crept in during the pleasant preceding times did not serve anyone well. And those who were at breaking point already were likely pushed to the limit or beyond by the additional stress and strain.

By Pete Edwards

Tending to our capacity is a background practice in life. Whenever you feel yourself at the limit of your capacity it is time to fill your cup, ideally well before your limit. Many of the practices discussed below are useful tactics to have in your arsenal, but internalising the principle is more important; Make filling your cup a mainstay in your life. Doing so can take many forms. I know people who play chess, lift weights, run, paint, play the piano, watch comedy, go to the cinema alone, climb, meditate, walk in nature and write to fill their cup. For me, basketball, lifting weights, writing, reading, and long walks with close confidants does the trick. Whatever it may be, weave it into your day, week, month and year deliberately. Do not wait until you are empty and in desperate need of filling. Be cognisant of habitually draining yourself. In doing so you leave yourself vulnerable should additional stress present itself. It bares repeating: Self-care is a high-performance strategy.

Reactive Foundations: Acceptance. Respite. Recovery. Present state awareness. (The Practice).

Now that you have internalised the bedrock principles of sleep and social connection and built upon them with the foundations of purpose and capacity, let us turn our attention to what to do when inevitable stressors and challenges do present themselves to you.

At some point, it is highly likely, if not unavoidable, that major stressors will show up in your life. These reactive foundations provide the essential utility belt to help you through.

Acceptance.

Acceptance is a foundation of resilience. For thousands of years Buddhists spoke very eloquently about how not accepting reality leads to suffering. To brutally simplify their many wise teachings for the sake of expedience what they concluded was this: Reality is what it is, and nothing you wish or want changes the reality of the world. But the gap created by the distance between the way that things are and the way you wish them to be can be a cause of suffering. When we desire things to be different than they are but cannot affect that change, we highlight the absence of the desired state. Furthermore, we can create a sense of futility and dissatisfaction with our lives. It is impossible to change this inner state without either acceptance or reality conforming to our desire. Since the latter rarely happens serendipitously and is absolutely outside of our control, acceptance is our only remaining choice to alleviate the suffering.

Often when acceptance is spoken about as a strategy for alleviating stress it is met with criticism that stems from misunderstanding. The criticism is that one cannot simply roll over and accept the world the way it is. When faced with injustice, persecution or similar challenges, we must stand up and fight for change or justice etc. Quite true. But far from being the opposite of acceptance, those actions require acceptance. Only once a person has accepted reality for what it is can they determine which actions are pragmatic and can be taken to affect change.

For example, Let's say a person has been wronged and publicly humiliated on a social media site.

Without acceptance that this has happened the only options the person has are avoidance, anger, despair, wishing, denial etc. All of these are forms of suffering that will not change reality. Once the person accepts that the wrong has happened and that they were the subject, they open up options that may actually be useful, like legal action, retaliation, conscious ignoring without denial, or humour. Some of these paths are obviously more desirable or productive, but all are more likely to affect a change in reality, and acceptance is essential for this process.

Acceptance of reality does not equal surrender. A person can still choose to fight, or respond in some other way against wrongdoing. But they are free to do so in a way that sees reality for what it is, and consequently they are free to take actions more appropriate to the situation.

I remember watching a TED talk given by an MMA fighter whose sensei had noticed she was closing her eyes when about to be punched; quite natural to those of us without a fighting background. He told her that 'it doesn't hurt any less with your eyes closed'. I found this to be

one of those snippets that encapsulates so much (metaphorically) about how we deal with problems we don't want to engage with. Symbolically closing our eyes when life lands a blow does not make it hurt less. It is avoidance and a lack of acceptance that actually prevents us from taking action to avoid, deal with, or respond to the blow.

Similarly I tell my clients that you cannot solve a problem you are not willing to have. Denying that a problem exists rarely results in a solution. We must face our issues, challenges and problems. No matter how dire or catastrophic they may be. We must accept that reality is reality; we must look it square in the eyes and see the true nature of what faces us.

This leads us into discussing the need for a skill as yet unmentioned; non-judgement. Often, we face not only objective reality, but also our judgments of it. We are the only species capable of seeing the real world and weaving our story about it into what we perceive as reality. Unfortunately, we are so good at layering our own inner story about the world on top of the actual world that we often fail to notice what is real and what is a fiction. I worked with a client recently who was anxious about attending an old friend's wedding due to his weight and perceived popularity. In his head, he imagined a nightmarish scenario awaited him. Due to some of the coaching we had done around his anxiety, he was able to notice what was real and what was invented. He noticed that the nightmare ahead was fiction, and a poorly defined one at that. He was able to sit with his anxiety and untangle his judgments about the upcoming event from the objective reality. Furthermore, he was able to notice that most of his anxiety came, in the main, from these judgments, and not the event itself. As the big day approached he had gained control over his anxiety and diminished its hold on him. Acceptance is essential, but gets us only so far. More on practising non-judgment later, but please note that it too is a necessary step on the path to resilience.

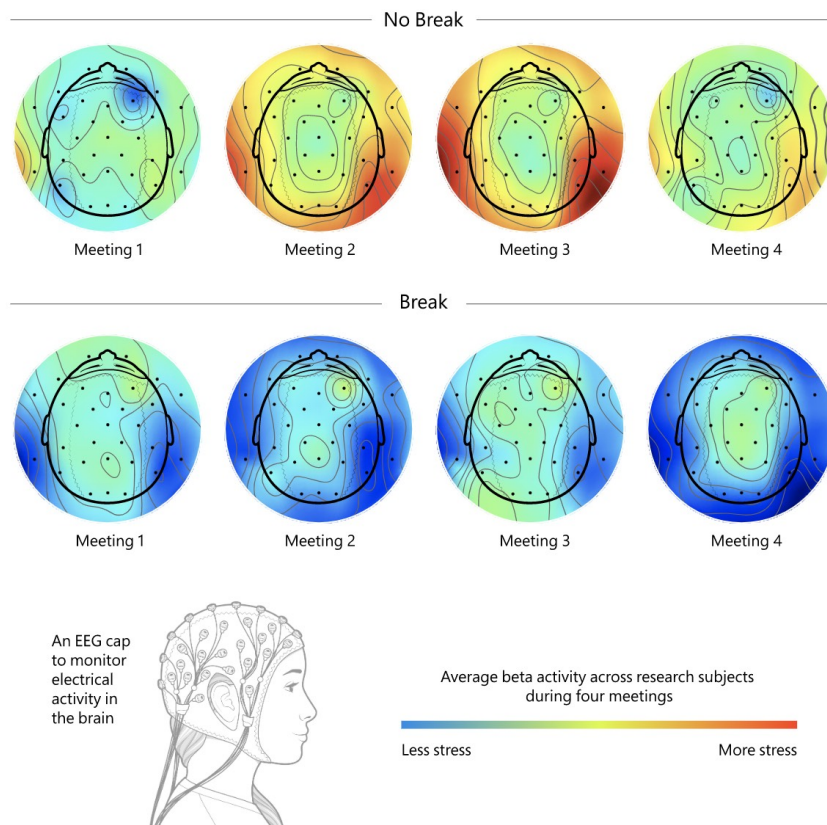
Respite.

Broadly speaking there are two kinds of stress response: Acute and chronic. The body has an acute stress response that is well adapted to help us survive life-threatening short-term dangers and stressors. We also have a longer-term or chronic stress response that served its purpose in our evolution but is arguably maladapted for the chronic stress we experience today.

In a now-famous study conducted by Microsoft, the impact of short respite breaks between meetings on the brain itself was clearly demonstrated. With much more evidence of stress being visible in subjects lacking those breaks.

Your brain works differently when you take breaks

Taking time out between video calls prevents stress from building up.



Credit: Microsoft's Human Factor Lab, Illustration by Brown Bird Design.

Finding even short moments of respite from stress provides enough space to calm down, get a handle on reactions and emotions, and think. This can often be the difference between artfully diffusing a tense situation and escalating one, regardless of timescale. On a short scale, we know that a heated discussion with a colleague or partner can be calmed and reconciled if both parties take a few minutes alone to diffuse the situation. Over a long timeframe we have all felt the reframing and diminishing of the impact of work stress on our personal state after getting some distance over a long weekend or week-long break.

As such, respite is a foundation of our reactive strategy. Seeking respite when stress presents, even for just a few minutes, can have a major impact on our state, our choices, and thus our outcomes. I feel respite should be our go-to reaction to stressors presenting, although I fully admit I am often not present or calm enough to action this. Cultivate the habit of finding refuge when under fire. It is not a sign of weakness, but a refined strategy that provides enough space for wisdom to surface.

When stress is prolonged this principle is even more important. The stress of events such as a long-term illness or recession can feel like a sustained onslaught on our mental and physical states. Finding pockets of respite allows us to recharge, gain perspective, and shore ourselves up for the longer struggle ahead.

Recovery.

Respite allows us space to breathe amid chaos. But recovery is how we fill our cup. To remain at our best and meet challenges effectively we must replenish ourselves. Lessons learned during

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HRV research teach us that restoration is an active and individual process. The things that count as recovery for one person may be quite different from another. Much of the difference has roots in how we perceive the activity. For one person, singing their toddler to sleep may be highly restorative. For another, the same act may be stressful. This likely depends on perception. The first person may cherish the moment of peace and bonding and have a child who falls asleep readily. The second may be time-poor, anxious about the hundreds of things left to do before they can sleep, and have a child who puts up a fight.

The key message here is that you must build in time to regenerate if you want to maintain output and performance. That recovery time needs to be something you experience as relaxing and calming. and can be unique to you. Here is a list of the common activities that typically help, or that I hear commonly come up with clients:

Moderate exercise like jogging, climbing, or cycling, yoga, meditation, napping, chess, painting, reading (especially fiction), writing, playing with your kids, playing a musical instrument, walking (especially in nature) hanging out with friends and watching comedy.

As you can see, the list is broad and varied. Once again the most important message is that, when in the throws of a stressful period, we must actively choose to include recovery techniques. So often, when times are demanding, the first things to get cut from our lives are the fun, leisure, and social activities that, ironically, buffer us from the negative toll of the very demands that take them away. I know, of course, that there is an element of blue-sky thinking here. Who among us is so present and calm in the face of catastrophe (or maybe just deadlines), that we can, at peak stress, take time out to play golf or take a stroll in the woods? I accept my optimism is a little strong. That said, I am sure you have had experiences where engaging in some form of fun diminished the perceived stress of a situation and augmented your capacity to perform through it. If this type of activity is not possible in the moment, consider counterbalancing the periods of high stress with pockets of recovery. Build it in, however you can.

The longer the stress is projected to continue, the more you must preserve your ability to recover. The most practical advice I can give is twofold. Firstly, when times are good, have a relaxing hobby, ideally a social one, that you attend regularly. Secondly, when challenges increase, preserve the hobby and protect the time you carved out for it. If you are running wall-to-wall busy as default, there is no slack and no room to build in recovery activity. It is far easier for it to already be a feature of your life.

If you do find yourself on the back foot, overwhelmed and stressed it can feel indulgent or even self-sabotaging to take time out for self-care and fun. But far from it: these activities will restore your capacity for performance and bolster your resilience. Self-care is a performance habit.

The Practice.

This tool combines mindfulness practices and principles, and behavioural change science. Although this practice arose organically from coaching clients and tweaking the process to produce the best results, it arrived at the same endpoint as a similar practice developed and taught by Dr Jud Brewer, a Yale-based researcher who has scientifically validated the method to be highly effective at changing behaviour.

Originally I called this the 'present state awareness practice', but clients shortened it to simply 'the Practice' and that stuck.

When people try to alter a negative or undesired behaviour, (say, overeating), they often use poor tactics that are doomed to fail, like willpower. "The Practice" has had an incredible success rate, is far kinder to oneself, and manages to affect desired changes by soothing the inner friction between goals and desires, rather than by overpowering the latter.

Here is a brief description to help you understand the process, with a more detailed walkthrough of the process to follow shortly;

Once you have chosen the object or target for the practice -such as overeating - keep a background awareness of times when the impulse to engage in that behaviour arises.

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When you notice the impulse arise, turn your attention towards the feelings, context and circumstances surrounding it. Do this non-judgmentally. No decision is good or bad here, you are simply observing the sensations and thoughts as they present themselves to your consciousness. Bathe in the feelings and experience them as fully as you can. Regardless of the outcome or actions taken, there can be no judgment. Later on, (a few days is ideal), unpack the experience through reflective practice. Ideally with a 'coach' of some description such as a friend, a trained coach or even a notebook.

The fundamental philosophy behind this practice is that within each of us there are essentially two selves. One is the thinking self and the other is the experiencing self. This distinction was first presented through the work of Daniel Kahneman and is based on neuroscience regarding how the different modules of the mind experience reality and produce our conscious thoughts.

The thinking self is the newer part of our brains, thought to reside in the neocortex. This part of our 'self' is responsible for higher thought, planning, reflecting, rumination and analytical thought. It is normally running a simulation of life in the background, somewhere off in the future or past, processing and thinking. It is generally, without training, not very good at being in the moment, being non-judgmental or quiet.

The experiencing self is quite the opposite. It only knows three seconds of temporal space; this second, the last one and the next one. It is emotional, instinctive, fast reacting and always present.

Inner friction arises when the two selves are at odds with one another about which behaviours we should express. For example; you are tired and stressed at the end of the day. You get home, open the cupboard to make a cup of tea and, there are the cookies, right in front of you in a see through jar! Your experiencing self is tired, hungry, stressed and maybe frustrated. It wants cookies. But your thinking self has grand plans involving weight loss and abs. In the moment your 'self' is aware of both of these wants and one of them will triumph. If the experiencing self wins and you eat the cookie, your thinking self will likely be full of judgment or excuses. Judgment may take the form of a self-berating inner voice: 'you weak-minded fool, why did you eat that?'. Or maybe it will make excuses such as 'it's only one cookie, I'll be good tomorrow'. This may be accompanied by negative feelings like shame, guilt, frustration at your next weigh-in or even anger at your lack of willpower. But maybe you were self-disciplined enough to forego your cookie? Well done you! Frustratingly, however, now your experiencing self feels hard done by and will increase its craving next time in an attempt to be heard. Either way, you are experiencing inner friction between your conflicting desires.

If only there was a way to quell the friction and easily make the 'right' choice for your long-term goals and wellbeing more regularly, without the need for great willpower. When working with a client on this exact subject, she articulated it like this: "I didn't want to eat the junk. At least that's what I thought. The truth was I actually really did want the junk. That's why I ate it. I wanted to not want it. This practice helped me genuinely not want it, which made not eating it easy". Couldn't have put it better myself.

The secret to doing this is to mindfully, and non-judgmentally, experience the craving, drive and context of the arising impulses to engage in the behaviour you are trying to alter.

When you become aware of the craving, (opening the cupboard and seeing the cookies, then feeling the desire to eat them, in our example), turn your attention to the feelings, thoughts and outer context of that moment. This is bringing your conscious awareness and with it the thinking self into that moment. This is where ordinarily a natural occurrence would be the thinking self's thoughts on the whole thing. If you allow this to occur, your thinking self's attention is now on its own judgments and thoughts, as opposed to the pure experience of the situation. This prevents some of the magic happening. If you hold your non-judgmental attention on your pure present inner state, you paradoxically create a little distance between your 'self' and your state. This has the curious effect of quelling the power that state has over you when you identify as the feelings instead of simply experiencing them. It takes the feeling from being a part of you to being a part of your experience, and this is powerful. Instead of being frustrated as though you and frustration were one and the same, you now see frustration separately. Frustration being an observed feeling rather than an integral part of who you are in that moment robs it of its power over you. Instead of

acting as frustration personified, you can see it, experience it and choose how to act. Which is normally more desirable than how frustration would drive you to act if you were one.

Utilise this practice whatever you are craving sensations (whether that's food, cigarettes, or pornography), and you could be very pleasantly surprised by the results. The power of the cravings will dissipate the more closely you observe them. Instead of the friction between craving and higher goals being the backdrop to your efforts to change, deep insight and peaceful reconciliation will take its place.

One thing that is important here, is that success in this practice is not outcome based. Eat the cookie or don't, neither is wrong or "bad". Success is the recognition of the arising craving, bathing in it non-judgementally, and reflecting later, (also non-judgementally). Judgments contaminate experience.

Reflective practice.

The lion's share of the practice is in the moment. The act of bathing in your reactions, creating separation and observing them provides huge dividends, as discussed above. However, it would be a mistake not to touch on the value to be found in reflective practice. Essentially this simply means unpacking the learnings from your practice later on, when being dispassionate is easier. This allows you to integrate the experience into yourself more fully. Internalising the insights gleaned and deepening your understanding of yourself and your behaviours. Essentially this is like a post-game analysis. You can see things and make connections that otherwise are tricky to achieve if your practice is limited to the moment.

This is often a part I help my clients with during coaching sessions, by providing a sounding board and asking careful questions to tease out deeper insights. The act of having to articulate the insights of a present state awareness practice is enough to force a deeper level of understanding. This is due to a universal truth that we tend to accept an inner level of understanding of our reality that is conceptual and emotive. Having to translate those deep emotional concepts into words so that we can effectively convey them to another mind forces more attention onto the subject, and augments thinking. Speaking to another person is hugely useful in this regard but, in the absence of an appropriate person, writing also fulfils the same purpose. In some regards, writing may even be superior. Depending on the nature of the person you are speaking to, they could provide more frustration, negative emotion and contamination. A blank page rarely does. Remember a few paragraphs ago when I said judgements contaminate experience? That goes for the judgments of others as well. If the person you speak to as part of your reflective practice offers judgments, they may taint your pure insights. If they offer advice, that can be just as counterproductive. As soon as they give their advice, they rob you of the self-learning and responsibility needed for the practice to be effective. In fact, giving advice is almost the cardinal sin of coaching, as it is trading coaches advice for the subjects responsibility. Finally, if your reflective partner is not skilled at asking the right questions, they may not facilitate deep exploration to the same extent as being alone with your thoughts for 15 minutes would.

The reflective practice does not have to be done with a professional coach or psychologist. It can be a chat over a coffee with a friend who is great at listening and refrains from giving advice. I often meet a close friend who is a sports coach, mentor and even father figure to me. When I am in a bind he listens, and often asks the question I'm hiding from with genuine curiosity, and a total lack of judgement, never giving advice. These meetings often force me to confront a tough question or hard truth I've been shirking. Having to answer those questions out loud forces me to face them without hiding, the lack of judgment makes it safe for me to do that, and the yield from such conversations is always a step closer to clarity, even if that's not a great picture sometimes.

Practices:

Slack

Slack is the wiggle room you have available for the inevitable perturbations you will face in life. I was taught the importance of slack quite painfully during a particularly challenging period. At the time, my wife and I had no slack in the system whatsoever. We both worked condensed hours so we could spend time with our young children. But in order to do so we sacrificed the slack in our

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day-to-day system. We both had busy roles. Condensing them down into compressed hours meant frequently working at home in the evening just to keep on top of the workload. Two kids under five soaked up every spare hour, and even finding time for physical training (which we both enjoy and value, and don't see as a chore) was incredibly difficult. Under normal operating procedure, we just about stayed on top of things, although we were both always tired and often on the edge of feeling overwhelmed. When shit hit the fan, however, the secondary stress was immense and strained us to our limits. For example, when one of the kids picked up a bug and needed time off school, there was the inevitable debate about who would have time off to care for them. We would go back and forth about who had more important appointments that day, who did the last bout and who would be more behind if they took time off.

A few days off work to look after a little one would mean a week of late evening work to catch up, a whole world of diary juggling and two stressed, overwhelmed parents. The stress of having to take care of our kids if they were poorly was minimal. Like any parents we were happy to be there for them, and accepted that they would be sick from time to time. But the wider impact made the relatively low-stress event a relatively high-stress situation. This is how a lack of slack hinders resilience. It is a multiplier of stress. When the system is packed to capacity, there is no room for added strain. All areas of your life are connected by time constraints. You can think of time being like a spider web joining every aspect of your life. When the web is pulled at one point, the tension affects all others. A little slack built onto the system lessens this collateral impact.

Thinking of ways you can build even a little slack into the system can provide a buffer against this effect. This helps to limit the stress to the stressor, rather than allowing it to permeate other areas of life. Think of ways you can build slack into your systems, even if just as contingency plans. In the above example, I managed to delegate some tasks each day to free up a little wiggle room. But I also conditionally delegated tasks in the instance that I was called away from work for a few days. My team knew exactly what needed doing to cover the situation. For example, if I now call my right-hand man to say I'm going to be off he knows to call my appointments to reschedule the ones he can't tend to. He knows he has my trust to make decisions on the fly and he knows to use his discretion to use extra man hours to make sure customers are taken care of. The last time this unfortunate circumstances arose I had nearly a month off work. Norovirus took down my son, then my daughter, then my wife before finally getting to me. Immediately following that my son got croup. This meant that I returned to work in time for planned time off at half-term! I had worked three days in three and a half weeks. My debriefing when I got returned was 10 minutes long. I asked my head guy what needed my attention and he said nothing. He gave me a one page report about what had transpired in the time I was gone and what he did to handle it. Nothing needed my intervention.

This is building a resilient system; this is using inbuilt slack to weather inevitable storms.

Mindfulness

I fear the word mindfulness has become overused in recent years. It seems to have been appropriated to many practices that are not scientifically or traditionally mindfulness. Visualisation exercises for example are commonly used or spoken about as mindfulness. They are not, they are visualisation. As such I've noticed the term begin to invite rolled eyes and tuning out when brought up yet again as a magic cure for something or other. But sideline any prejudice you may have. Here, I'm talking about rock solid scientifically researched, evidence-based mindfulness practice. Strictly secular, proven, and concrete protocols that provide predictable and repeatable results.

I accept that some of you reading this may already have a mindfulness practice and enjoy the spiritual benefits. Or have deep respect for the ancient traditions that make up the roots of mindfulness. I do not mean to be dismissive of this meaning, tradition, or the benefits it can bring. I am simply focused in this tiny section on a practice that is proven (in the western scientific sense of the word) to work for most people most of the time. Anything more I feel is beyond the scope of this entry in this book.

Now that we have established what I am discussing, let's focus on why!

Mindfulness refers to the practice of sitting with your attention on your attention for a sustained period. You sit, focusing on your breath, or more specifically, one small aspect of your breath, such as the tip of your nostril where the air flows over in each in breath and out breath. While doing this, you are tasked with noticing each time your attention diverts away from your breath to anything else. When you notice your attention deviate, you gently bring it back to your breath, with no stress, and no judgement. Do this practice for a short time each day over a sustained period and it has profound benefits for your brain. These benefits include; improved working memory, greater emotional awareness and control, enhanced ability to perform mentally in stressful situations, and reduced stress responses in stressful situations. That's just the first order, direct consequences. Imagine the potential second and third order consequences: things like better relationships with kids, spouse and colleagues, less overwhelm, smarter career decisions and better eating habits. The impact on a person's life from these kinds of improvements could be profound.

How does mindfulness have these effects? By enhancing our attentional control. Our attention is an amazing and complex evolutionary trait that has done wonders for keeping us alive in countless possible scenarios through the ages. We are easily distracted, and thank goodness. Imagine how hard surviving evolution would be if you didn't look abruptly away from the deer you were stalking through the woods, recoil when you felt a presence on your arm that turned out to be a snake or poisonous spider, or didn't suddenly shift your attention in on the car in front that just made an emergency stop while driving? The point is that attention is always shifting focus, zooming in and zooming out. When it is zoomed in, it is hyper-aware of what's in focus and relatively oblivious to things outside that focus. This is obviously good for some situations and less good for others as, when it is zoomed out, we are aware more broadly of the big picture, but can easily miss details. It is for this reason we use both modes all the time.

Mindfulness does something special with attention, though, and herein lies the benefits. The practice of mindfulness cultivates meta-attention. Or the ability to focus your attention and awareness *on* your attention.

As you sit in mindfulness practice you must be aware of your attention in order to notice when it has deviated, so you can bring it back to your breath,. This cultivates space between your thoughts, feelings and reactions, and your self. It might seem paradoxical, but this distance or non-attachment to your visceral reactions enables a connection, rather than a disconnection, with the very same reactions you've uncoupled from.

You see, without separation between your experience and your consciousness you *are* your emotions, you *are* your reactions. You are angry, scared, sad, depressed, anxious, elated, excited etc. Whereas when you create some conscious space between your reactions and your awareness, the situation shifts subtly but significantly. Instead of being angry, you now feel anger, you are aware of it, you can observe it. That non attachment to you emotion allows you to see it somewhat objectively. This stops you getting so stuck in experiencing the emotional response that you are better able to consciously decide, with presence and poise, how to respond.

This is a very significant distinction. The nuanced difference between reacting and responding in stressful situations can be life and death for soldiers, surgeons and rescue workers. It can be a deal made or lost for businesspeople and politicians, it can be divorce or reconciliation for couples or connection or disconnection for parents and children. It can be the difference between desirable outcomes and miserable ones in many walks of life.

Now I hear some sceptical minds making an important observation. I've listed a bunch of stressful situations in which enhanced attentional control and meta-attention could be of great utility, but mindfulness practice is not a stressful situation... Does this really transfer? Thankfully, the answer is yes. Research shows that as little as 12 minutes per day of dedicated mindfulness practice is enough to have a robust impact. Benefits transfer to other walks of life when not meditating, and these improvements persist over time. Think of mindfulness practice as mind squats. You do them well in advance of challenge, so that you have strength when needed. In a similar way to working out, more is better, but only to a point. 12 minutes per day seems to be the minimum effective dose. More likely provides

better results and longer periods of time (six years vs six months, for example) likely provide far superior benefits. But at least you know that you can get started and gain benefits from a small and achievable practice. You do not need to move mountains to benefit from mindfulness.

Insurance.

Insurance is the most pragmatic of resilience practices. Insurance is purchasing peace of mind and resulting inner calm. Just think of how stressful every car journey would be if you didn't have insurance! The potential for financial loss would be immense every time you nipped to the shops. Life insurance is another good example. Heaven forbid that something awful would happen to your spouse, but if it did, the horrific situation would be easier to bear with the added financial security and distance from work commitments insurance would provide.

2020's pandemic brought this home for me. I knew so many businesses here in the UK that were brought to the brink by being forced to close and use debt as a lifeline, (mine included). One business I knew had pandemic insurance, which seems almost bleakly amusing with hindsight - everyone must have seen that as a paranoid waste beforehand! But, when lockdowns were forcing businesses to close this guy was insured for his income, rent, and his staff's wages. He was not the slightest bit stressed: he saw lockdown as a six-month holiday totally bought and paid for.

We can harness some of that sense of wellbeing by considering our worst-case scenarios. Think of the situations that would be unfortunate, outside your control and devastating. Then at least get a quote. Often, the cost of insuring yourself against, and thus buying freedom from, the worry about those situations, is extremely cheap in the grand scheme of things.

Sleep

I will dive deeply into sleep in the chapter dedicated entirely to it. But for now let me give you a preview, focused of course on its interaction with resilience.

Sleep is the single most rejuvenating thing the body and brain can do. Lack of sleep can compromise our readiness for stress, and our resilience to it. Ironically, sleep is often one of the first things to be hit by stress. Making good sleep habits and tactics for dealing with stress all the more important.

The key way in which poor sleep negatively impacts resilience is through its effects on the amygdala - the part of the brain that senses threat - and how it triggers stress responses. When sleep deprived, there is a two-pronged assault on this system. Firstly, the threshold for amygdala activation is lowered, meaning that less threatening events trigger more threat responses than usual. A good example of this is what happens if you show a series of faces showing a wide range of emotions from negative, like anger, to neutral, like apathy, to positive, like joy, to people who are sleep deprived. When compared to normal sleep controls, sleep-deprived people sense negativity and threatening intent in neutral faces that they more accurately (and less reactively) discern and neutral and non-threatening when sufficiently rested. Imagine the impact of this kind of impact on your life and social health over the course of a year..

The second assault on this system is the inhibition of the ability of the pre-frontal cortex to quell the stress response produced by the amygdala. Under usual circumstances the frontal cortex can exert some control over behaviour and interpretation of events even after the amygdala has sounded the alarm. But one's ability to do this is abated by poor sleep, leaving you more reactive.

This double whammy of greater threat perception, greater reactivity, and lesser ability to temper your reactions can have a clear negative impact on resilience. Unfortunately, the bad news does not stop there.

Physical performance is negatively affected by poor sleep. With coordination, pain tolerance, and rate of perceived exertion all affected by even one single poor night. This lack of physical resilience is even notable in the incidence of heart attacks, which spike in the UK on the day we lose an hour of sleep thanks to daylight saving time. Willpower is diminished, leading us to poorer choices and less restraint.

The net impact of poor sleep on resilience is significant, although not easily noticed, because sleep-deprived people don't perceive these changes cognitively.

In light of these negative consequences to resilience, getting enough quality sleep seems prudent. I will cover in more detail how best to go about this, how much is enough and other important information in the entire section dedicated to sleep. For now, however, just know that valuing sleep, especially when not stressed, is well worth doing.

It is, of course, unfortunate that when we are stressed, preoccupied and worried sleep is often negatively affected, preventing us from accessing its full rejuvenating properties. But we can take action. Here is a short list of practices you can employ to increase the chance of a sound night of sleep when stressed:

1. Listen to fiction: Fiction requires the brain to create a virtual world to add imagery to the story. Even better, you don't need to do anything while listening as the brain is wired to do this automatically. In doing so the happy byproduct is that shutting down the analytical part of the brain, quieting your active worry and allowing the nervous system to relax. I've worked with CEOs who've had great success relaxing with the collected Harry Potter, for example. Obviously what you listen to is important, however, and Stephen King novels may not exactly be conducive to calming your nervous system!
2. Schedule worry time: Dedicate a time slot in your diary to worry about the things that concern you. The brain will often let go of troublesome thoughts when you have scheduled time to address them, even if they remain unresolved.
3. Mindful breathing: Mindfulness requires practice to achieve the proficiency necessary to help with acute stress. Many of us find practising mindfulness difficult at the best of times. When acutely stressed, it can be even more difficult to sit with this immensely potent practice. But if one is well versed, mindfulness can help calm the nervous system and mind, releasing inner tension and promoting good sleep. Once again this is an example of how resilience is a practice. Building these practices in normal times, allows us to tap into them in challenging ones. I often find mindful walking to be of great utility during acute stress.

Avoid using alcohol and sleeping pills. Even though both of these can indeed help get you to sleep, they will greatly disrupt the quality of your sleep. Alcohol specifically reduces the amount of REM sleep you can get, which is the most healing and rejuvenating type of sleep for the brain and is essential for processing stress.

Contingency Planning

Plan for potential disasters, it will save you great stress should they ever occur. Take a simple fire drill, performed by every conscientious building. We know the risk of fire is low, and we do many things to mitigate it, like having fire-resistant staircases and smoke alarms. But we also know that if a serious fire does occur, the results can be unthinkable. As such, as remote as the likelihood is, we run drills to be prepared for their unlikely occurrence. Knowing how you will cope and behave in disaster allows you a chance at handling disaster far better than hitting a situation blind. I have a very personal example of this.

My wife was struck by a mystery lung condition that led to her getting serious lung infections and pneumonia on a regular but completely unpredictable basis. Every three months or so, she would wake feeling fine, or maybe a little tight in her chest, and by the afternoon, she was bedridden with full body pain, barely able to breathe, and a raging fever. Many times she had to be taken to the hospital and would be there for days, often the bouts would reduce her capacity for weeks. As this was happening, I had to take care

of her and both our children who were both under five while trying to keep my business functioning. The unpredictable nature of the bouts made this very stressful, the threat to my wife's life and wellbeing made it extremely worrisome, and the need to care for and keep calm my children made this all very emotionally draining. Keeping my business functioning was enough to break me, as so much ran through me at the time. Add in the fact that this was during the early parts of the pandemic when a deadly killer respiratory infection was everywhere and came with many unknowns, and I was perpetually scared and on alert.

When it became obvious that this was going to happen repeatedly at some point (it took three years to get to the bottom of it), I realised I needed a contingency plan. I now have a 'code orange' and 'code red' system at my business. At any point I can simply text my right-hand man 'code orange' and he knows that a health concern is brewing at home. There is a file that has a checklist of how to handle the situation. My appointments get rescheduled, my coaching shifts get covered and my colleague knows he's empowered and trusted to make calls and how to report issues and actions to me to keep me in the loop. Situations can still be stressful, but the fact that I have a plan for how I will cope, even if only in some areas, frees up my capacity to engage fully where I am truly needed.

I have mentally rehearsed, and planned for many events I hope never to experience. But if I am ever unfortunate enough to be in the throws of one of them I will be more prepared and less likely to be caught off guard. In turn, this means I will hopefully navigate them better and bruise less as a result. These events include: the death of my wife, the forced closure of my business, natural disasters destroying my gym, diagnosis with a terminal illness, and key people in my business being incapacitated by illness for extended periods. None of these were fun to think about. But being even slightly prepared is better than (heaven forbid) falling foul of one completely unprepared.

Minimalism

Minimalism is the practice of needing less to be happy. Put simply, the higher your bar for what constitutes achievement happiness or contentment, the more sacrifice it takes to achieve and the less likely you are to get there. Western culture has, over the last 100 years, become a culture of more; of insatiable desire and ever-moving goalposts. This trend seems to have been exacerbated by social media in recent decades. This means that, for many of us, our inner bar for happiness has raised, and our actual happiness, or at least satisfaction, has dropped.

As an evolving social movement minimalism takes many forms. Some people focus on owning less; some on shifting spending habits toward experiences rather than things. I like to think of the first principle being not owning, but *needing* less. I think it's fine to have a nice car, expensive clothes, decorative objects in your house or a collection of novel coffee cups. Honestly, I have no issue with whatever brings you joy, and I am no lifestyle guru. But I do think that, from the perspective of resilience, it is wise to focus on needing less. My reasoning is twofold. Firstly, the less you need and the less you are attached to, the less vulnerable to loss you are. I have a friend and client who had both a BMW 7 series and an Aston Martin. During the early days of the pandemic his business was temporarily hit hard, which caused him huge amount of stress. Not only was he stressed that he had to pay two sets of car finance; he was also worried that he might have to give the Aston back. If we rewind a few years, however, he would recognise that his BMW was a dream come true until he bought the Aston. Imagine if, instead, he had the Aston, loved it and enjoyed the feeling it gave him when he drove it, but was not attached to it, instead seeing it as a luxury he enjoyed but did not need to be happy. In this scenario he could have given it up quickly and without regret, relieving much self-imposed stress. This thinking is by no means mine or even recent. Seneca and the other stoics thought, spoke and wrote extensively on the topic thousands of years ago.

Minimalism does not have to be about owning less arbitrarily. The strength of minimalism is in needing less for happiness; In the bar for enough being a low hurdle to jump. Consider adopting minimalism, even just in trial runs, to mentally lower the threshold for what is "enough".

Here are three simple suggestions for exercises that you could do this week to begin experimenting:

1. **Pack it all up:** Pack all your clothes, from socks to suits, as if you were moving house. For the next month get out only the items you need or want in the moment. You will be amazed by how few clothes you regularly use and need.
2. **Try fasting.** Fasting can be a remarkable tool for training you to need less and deal with cravings. Start with a single 24-hour fast. Pay close attention not only to the feelings that arise but also to how long they persist and where they are rooted. Often a single 24-hour fast is enough to illustrate to a person that they often eat out of boredom, comfort-seeking, habit and greed. This self-awareness alone is a powerful asset that transfers to other behaviours in other areas.
3. **Turn off all social media.** Try a week without SM. I dare you! As you go through this week, pay close attention to the absence of adverts and desires for things you don't need, but which you were previously made to believe you wanted. I have had zero social media on my phone for more than three years. Have I missed out on things? Yes, very likely; Some birthdays of acquaintances, some significant happenings in old friends' lives, but mostly adverts and unhealthy comparisons. The impact on my mental state and clarity has been huge.

Types of Resilience.

Resilience is not a singular state. Rather, there are XX key areas of life in which we may each have greatly varying degrees of resilience. A person may be robust and well-set in one area, and particularly vulnerable in another. I encourage you to meditate on each of the headings that follow, and honestly appraise your readiness in each: Could you face a perturbation in each of these fields of your life? Could you withstand even the slightest disruption or challenge? If you find areas in which your capacity is maxed out and even small additional stressors could make for a very stressful situation I encourage you to address it now, even if only with a contingency plan, rather than when you find yourself in need.

Social.

As mentioned above, humans are social animals who have a deep seated, primal need for social connection. Expulsion from our tribe was a death sentence historically and our brains still react badly to the threat of such an event. Loneliness and social isolation are detrimental to mental and physical health. Furthermore, the effect social toxicity is not to be underestimated, even if you baulk at the term itself. Having people, places and organisations in your life that actively negatively impact on your state can have a very real effect on your health. As such, curating your social environment is well worth the time and energy invested.

Equally, social support networks can be exceptionally useful when hard times strike. Having people around you who genuinely care about you, share life views and are willing to be there to support you is vital to wellbeing, and critical for our chance to thrive.

Emotional/Mental

I like to think of this as emotional and mental *fitness*. The goal is not to be untouchable, emotionally null, or tough to the point of being cold. I would wager that most psychologists would see this as avoidant rather than resilient. Rather, the goal would be to have a large capacity to deal with emotional and mental stressors and be able to tolerate them (bad feelings and all) and recover to a point of stability. To follow the fitness analogy a little, fitness is defined as the ability of an organism to cope with the demands of its environment. In our emotional fitness analogy, it would be defined as the ability to cope with the emotional demands of our environment. This does not mean cultivating a lack of emotional response to our demanding lives, and becoming callused and hardened. But rather, cultivating the ability to tolerate our emotions, both positive and negative, even in the extreme, while functioning well. It's not a case of being unaffected by events in our lives, and impervious to stress. Rather a case of being able to acknowledge our genuine emotional response to events, sit with the feelings, tolerate them, and move forwards with our lives and the situations we face with minimal contamination to our thoughts and behaviours.

An example: Say a man is going through a divorce. A 'toughness' approach might involve pretending he is unaffected, unperturbed, and rock solid. He arrives at work, choking down feelings and internalising his stress. He is likely to have some sort of coping mechanism; it might be drink, might be porn or maybe excessive exercise. The outer, hardened and steadfast image is itself a coping mechanism, an avoidance of feelings.

This is not resilience, it's denial.

Another man in the same position does not try to run, deny, or forcefully alter his emotional state. He accepts it, feels it, tolerates it. He's hurt... he's *devastated*. But he tolerates these feelings, knows they are real but impermanent, and that his life goes on. He does not try to rid himself of them through deleterious coping strategies. He gets up each morning and tries to focus on the reality, including the good. He finds purpose to keep him going, he engages in activities with friends where he does not talk about or focus on the divorce, gaining respite in so doing. He grabs a beer with his closest friends and they allow him to talk, moan and think aloud, offering support and companionship. Over time it hurts less. Not out of dulling his emotions, but out of processing them. Not through denial, but through acceptance one genuine moving on.

Emotional and mental resilience is about having the capacity, presence and inner strength to tolerate the worst and return to your centre. It takes courage to face your pain, fear, and grief.

Incidentally, the same is also true for positive feelings and thoughts. Extremely intense positive feelings and thoughts have the potential to be harmful. Emotional and mental fitness is as much about tolerating joy, optimism and other such states without losing the ability to think and see clearly. Many a person has been taken advantage of because they had their judgment and thought processes tainted by such extreme emotions. Again mental/emotional resilience and fitness is not about prohibiting yourself from feeling emotions or forbidding the experience of joy. But being able to balance these emotional states and maintain a presence and groundedness is closer to our goal.

Physical

Physical resilience is closely related to fitness. In fact, it could be conceived of as a specific component of fitness. You may think of physical resilience as robustness. How vulnerable is your body to injury, pain, breakdown and degeneration? Of course, as we age the more our robustness tends to drop. But this does not have to be the case, at least not to the extent that most people in their 40s 50s and 60s experience. Age-related decline in movement, stability and fitness are a result of a changing lifestyle interacting with a genetic tendency to decline with age. But here is what you must understand for your body's sake; genetics loaded the gun, but lifestyle pulled the trigger. Being sedentary, allowing muscle to wither, not maintaining the heart's strength and not maintaining the joints' range; all lead to the activation of the genes that code for degeneration, and the inactivity of the genes that stimulate regeneration. Lifestyle allows this to happen, and lifestyle can delay, and even reverse it.

If you are reading this in your 20s or 30s take note! The younger you start the younger you stay. Start and/or maintain a strong fitness practice now. Your 50-year-old self will thank you no end.

If you are reading this in your 40s or 50s take note. You are still quite young; Young enough to steer your body's future in a vastly different direction. Start lifting weights under guidance from a good coach. Start eating well, stretching and walking. Your 70-year-old self will thank you greatly.

If you are reading this in your 60s or 70s take note. Learn how to strength train, walk and stretch daily, I beg you. I have seen this simple combination reverse degeneration firsthand. I have seen men in their 70s recover from having a fall, begin this simple regimen and get younger before my eyes, reversing diabetes and improving mobility, stability and independence. I have seen women in their 60s and 70s reverse osteoporosis, build strength and outperform women 20 years younger in Nordic walking, running and daily tasks like gardening. There is no age at which the body stops responding to training. Invest in a good coach to teach you how to train and write you a solid program. Once you've done so maintain a robust fitness practice like your life depends on it... because it does.

Financial

Financial resilience feels easy to spot. ., and many of us will link wealth inextricably with financial resilience. There are countless examples, however, of people who had enough wealth to never work again and managed to become bankrupt. Financial resilience is about achieving a situation where you can withstand perturbations and remain solvent, stable and safe. The gap between how much you have and how much you have at risk is the key.

Yes, it's true that, for wealthy people, this is easier as only one element is required; to be sensible with their wealth. Having millions while also having millions at risk is not a resilient place to be. The famed purchase of Lehman Brothers is a fine example. The company had an extremely healthy business with hundreds of millions in assets. However, a few bad deals that exposed it to huge losses was all it took to wipe its value clean and force a sale to save the company from collapse.

For the majority of us who are far from having millions the state of financial resilience may require more sacrifice, and perhaps more frugality, but the same principles apply. Spend less than you earn, save or invest the difference and insure yourself against the worst. Let's imagine you earn somewhere around the UK average of around £33k per year. That's enough to live comfortably. But here are two examples of lifestyles on this income (I am specifically using my home town of Nottingham UK for reference, and other areas would differ, but the principle remains the same). In example one, our hypothetical person and their partner earning a similar wage drive a new car from a prestigious brand on finance, have a detached three-bedroom house, some credit card debt, go on nice holidays and have very little savings. Our second example drives an 8-year-old car from a less desirable (but equally reliable) company, has a similar sized house in a less prestigious area - or a two-bed apartment in the same area - goes on modest holidays and saves 30% of their wage.

Who would you rather be on a daily basis? Who would you rather be in 10 years? Most pointedly, who would you rather be following a financial crisis when one of your incomes is decimated? Speaking from painful experience I'd rather be the second, more frugal person. Although they might not see it as such the factors driving the first person to live beyond their means are likely desire, envy and the fear of missing out or falling behind.

The other aspect of financial resilience is insurance. You can insure yourself against almost any eventuality, and the cost is often negligible. I suggest considering insurance against anything you cannot weather with solvent wealth. If one of you dies, can your partner provide for your kids and live comfortably on your savings? Probably not if you're like most people. If a flood destroys my gym, we cannot reopen and all my kit is ruined my insurance will pay my wages, and that of my team, replace my kit and give me the money to find and fit out a new location. I could never fund this with myself, and the price I pay for such peace of mind is well worth it.

Material

Material resilience is closely related to the minimalism I mentioned earlier. The more stuff you are strongly attached to, and need for happiness, the more vulnerable you are to loss and despair. This concept is far from new, with Buddhist teachings stretching back thousands of years cautioning us about attachment to things. Fundamentally, the philosophy states that everything you need to be happy and content is within you. Things are not the emotions they conjure. When a thing evokes an emotion or memory within us we must discern the separation between the two. By doing so we can enjoy our things, and the experiences they provide, without being so attached that their absence would cause suffering.

Rolf Dobelli, in his book 'the art of the good life' refers to this as preferred indifference: 'I would prefer a Porsche to my BMW, he writes, but not having it won't make me less happy'. The point Rolf makes is that every material possession in your life is a source of potential suffering if you give it that power. We can shore up our resilience to loss by enjoying them while they are here, and accepting ahead of time that they will one day be in our past. Furthermore, the fact that these possessions are behind us does not take from who we are or our ability to be happy and content.

To come full circle to my earlier Buddhist reference, here is an old Buddhist parable about loss:

‘.....And the teacher says; take this cup, it is my favourite. I drink from this cup every day, it was a gift, and is special to me. But this cup is broken. I know that one day the cat will walk on the table and knock it, or I will drop it while doing the dishes, and it will break. So I cherish my time with my favourite cup, because it is already broken’.

Note that the Buddhist teacher does not need to forego the cup; He can fully appreciate and enjoy it, while not becoming so attached that he cannot accept the impermanence of his time with it.

Once again, I would like to underline that I am no guru. This list above of the areas of life in which you could be more or less resilient is likely incomplete. I gave it much thought, but if you discover other areas particular to yourself or universal to humanity, please let me know about your discoveries, just as soon as you’ve given them the attention they deserve!

Quantifying Resilience. The HRV connection.

Heart rate variability (HRV) is an exciting and quickly developing field of research and application that simply must be mentioned here. The aforementioned telomere length testing and some other, newer tests can tell us how we are ageing and the overall impact our lives are having on our health at the cellular level. Neither can provide us with real-time, low-cost feedback about the way the daily choices we are making are impacting our ability to deal with stress. HRV testing, however, can do just that. With a simple and relatively low-cost wearable device, you can get immediate feedback about how ready to deal with stress your body is. You can then trial any given intervention, whether it’s dietary change, a new exercise routine, meditation or a change of career. I use HRV tracking with my coaching clients all the time and have seen a huge impact using such tight feedback loops. It is far easier to change a behaviour when you can see the results immediately.

What is HRV?

Heart rate variability is the variable difference between each beat of the heart. It may sound like your heartbeat is a metronome steadily ticking along at a consistent rhythm, but measured in the 100ths of a second your heart is very acutely varying its tempo from one beat to the next in line with the demands of your environment. Sit down for an hour then abruptly stand up and your heart rate does not lag. It responds in real-time to even the intention to stand. The measurement of this ability for the heart to vary acutely according to demand is a measure of your body’s ability to deal with stress. If the fidelity with which the heart is reacting to the environment is compromised it is a sign that readiness, and thus resilience, are also compromised. Thus high heart rate variability is a good thing (not to be confused with high actual heart rate).

Today wearable technology can track a person’s heart rate variability with extreme accuracy. Overnight and early morning HRV scores are a good indicator of stress levels and readiness levels and, because this can be tracked from one day to the next quite sensitively, we can use this data to monitor lifestyles and interventions and see stress’ impact on the body. Simply put, we can see what’s working, hindering and helping. For example, when I first started using a sleep and HRV tracker I was struck by the degree to which alcohol and eating late impacted my sleep quality and readiness. Making changes to these factors boosted both values and I could both feel and see the benefit. Another example is clients who have used feedback like this to identify the impact of caffeine, stressful meetings and of training. I’ve been able to predict when athletes should back off from training, see the gradual decrease during work weeks above a certain number of hours, and see the benefits of positive practices like meditation and proper wind-down routines.

By combining this background data with detailed journals we can tease out the factors that make both good and bad differences and make gradual changes accordingly, gradually raising our level of resilience and readiness to deal with stress.

One of the insights we all know to be true is that in times of stress we often turn to crutches and coping mechanisms like alcohol, caffeine and overworking to ease the pain temporarily, but have

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a detrimental impact on our wellbeing, further compromising our resilience and readiness. HRV monitoring can help us reframe these choices and hopefully encourage better ones, through biofeedback. When you can see the detrimental impact a given crutch is having on your health you can better face reality and make choices congruent with your higher goals. Granted, some stressors are too big and hairy for the data from a ring or watch to protect you from. But resilience is a multifactorial approach that has a summative impact. Maybe using an HRV tracker will help with some of the baseline habits and practices, contributing to a higher state of readiness that helps when the big problems arise.

The Practice Of Resilience

I have outlined here my thoughts on how to see resilience as a practice in our life. A state you achieve and nurture through deliberate choices.

It starts with a solid bedrock of good sleep and a healthy dose of solid social support (relationships), these hum along in the back of our consciousness as factors we barely think about (when they're going well), but well-cultivated habits and health in these areas are the very basis of weathering storms, both large and small, when they appear in our lives.

Upon this bedrock are built the principle foundations of purpose and capacity. Purpose tints the lens through which we see the world and all the challenges that may present themselves. Strong purpose guides us and bolsters us in the face of challenges. Capacity is essential for resilience. In a life maxed out with small stressors, there is no spare capacity for additional challenges, large or small. We must tend to our capacity, and guard against insidious creep upon it.

With rock-solid foundations in place we are well-poised to meet challenges that arise. When they do, reactive foundations are our response playbook. Acceptance allows us to acknowledge our problems and face them. Respite allows space to think and compose. Recovery restores our capacity and gives us the strength to strive toward regaining balance. Finally, the practice of present-state awareness without judgment allows us to learn, achieve groundedness, and eventually self-mastery.

The practices listed above are just some of the tools and tactics to be used as you see fit, alongside ones of your invention, on your own path.

Whoever you are, you likely have people who to some extent rely on you. You are the first person in that queue. Tend to your wellbeing, and make effort to make that state of wellbeing robust.