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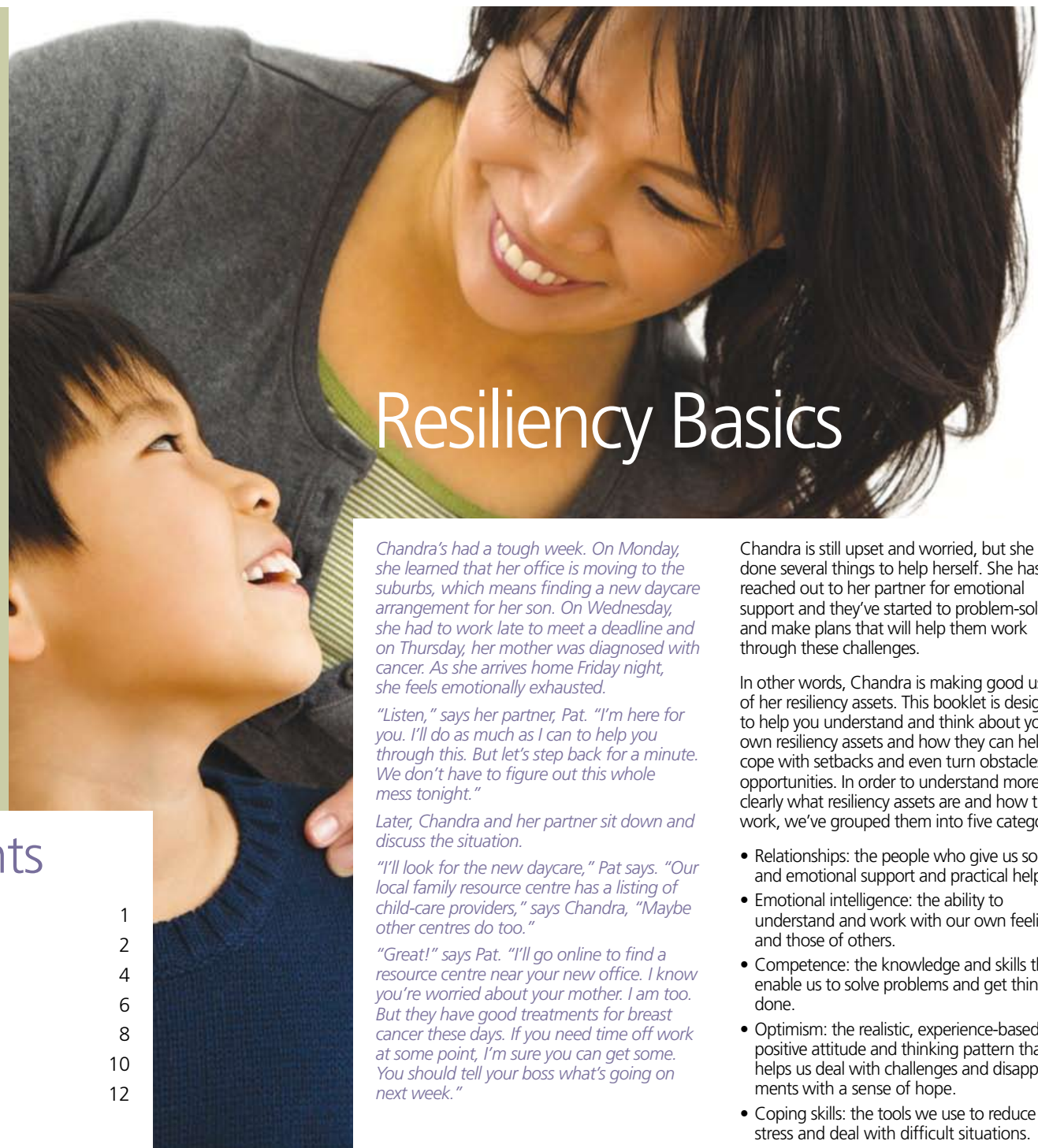
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Bouncing Back How **Workplace Resiliency** Can Work for You



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Have you ever wondered why some people seem to be particularly good at dealing with the ups and downs of life and work?

There could be many reasons, but people who are good at coping with challenges and setbacks usually have one thing in common: resiliency.

Resiliency is the ability to persist in the face of adversity and “bounce back” from setbacks.

Resiliency comes from a combination of positive attributes we develop through our upbringing, education, social and cultural connections, and other life experiences. These “resiliency assets,” as we are going to call them, help us cope with disappointments and stress, overcome obstacles, recover from or adjust to change or misfortune, and deal with the normal stresses and challenges of life.

In order to understand resiliency, it may help to think of the challenges you have faced in your life and reflect on how you responded to situations such as a serious illness or injury, divorce or separation, the loss of a job, major changes at work, or even positive changes such as the birth of a new baby or a promotion at work.

Resiliency helps us deal with these kinds of challenges and is also an important factor in mental health and in job and career success. This booklet will help you understand what resiliency is, where yours comes from and how resiliency can help you in the workplace.

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Resiliency Basics

Chandra's had a tough week. On Monday, she learned that her office is moving to the suburbs, which means finding a new daycare arrangement for her son. On Wednesday, she had to work late to meet a deadline and on Thursday, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. As she arrives home Friday night, she feels emotionally exhausted.

“Listen,” says her partner, Pat. “I’m here for you. I’ll do as much as I can to help you through this. But let’s step back for a minute. We don’t have to figure out this whole mess tonight.”

Later, Chandra and her partner sit down and discuss the situation.

“I’ll look for the new daycare,” Pat says. “Our local family resource centre has a listing of child-care providers,” says Chandra, “Maybe other centres do too.”

“Great!” says Pat. “I’ll go online to find a resource centre near your new office. I know you’re worried about your mother. I am too. But they have good treatments for breast cancer these days. If you need time off work at some point, I’m sure you can get some. You should tell your boss what’s going on next week.”

Chandra is still upset and worried, but she has done several things to help herself. She has reached out to her partner for emotional support and they’ve started to problem-solve and make plans that will help them work through these challenges.

In other words, Chandra is making good use of her resiliency assets. This booklet is designed to help you understand and think about your own resiliency assets and how they can help you cope with setbacks and even turn obstacles into opportunities. In order to understand more clearly what resiliency assets are and how they work, we’ve grouped them into five categories.

- Relationships: the people who give us social and emotional support and practical help.
- Emotional intelligence: the ability to understand and work with our own feelings and those of others.
- Competence: the knowledge and skills that enable us to solve problems and get things done.
- Optimism: the realistic, experience-based positive attitude and thinking pattern that helps us deal with challenges and disappointments with a sense of hope.
- Coping skills: the tools we use to reduce stress and deal with difficult situations.

Relationships

Relationships with family, friends and colleagues are arguably the most important resiliency assets. Social scientists refer to the social networks and connections that make our lives better as “social capital.” Research shows that people with lots of social capital are more successful, productive and happy. Spending time with our favourite people and sharing our feelings and experiences helps us to meet challenges in a healthier way and also helps us to approach every day with a positive attitude.

In the workplace, positive relationships with supervisors and co-workers make our jobs easier. They also increase our ability to plan, meet goals and deal with challenges. If you are in a leadership position at work, you should know that effective leadership is the most important factor in any company's resiliency. Building and maintaining positive relationships with employees, supervisors, co-workers and clients is a key aspect of everyone's job.

Relationship assets:

- good relations with supervisors and co-workers;
- strong family and social networks outside of work;
- social skills and self-confidence;
- ability to be assertive, yet flexible, with others;
- ability to ask for help;
- being able to smile at people in a genuine way;
- a sense of belonging.



Jean-Marc, aged 25, was turned down for a job he really wanted. “I totally messed up that interview!” he thinks. “I’ll never get another chance like that.” Then he stops and tells himself, “If I keep thinking like this, I’ll just be miserable.” He calls home and expresses his frustration and disappointment to his father. “You really wanted that job,” his dad says. “It’s tough, but stick with it. You have lots of skills. Sometimes it takes a while to get a break.”

Jean-Marc feels a little better. He calls his buddy, Omar. “Hey, do you want to come over and watch the game tonight? I didn’t get that job and I need to get my mind off it. Listening to some of your bad jokes would help.”

“Sure,” laughs Omar. “I’ll come over at 7:30.”

Trouble getting along with the boss?

One issue that would test anyone's workplace resiliency is a problem with a supervisor. There are no magic solutions for these kinds of difficulties, but here are some ideas that might help.

- Don't take it personally. Try to see the situation from your supervisor's point of view. What does she have to accomplish? What pressures does she have to deal with?
- Look for a positive quality of your supervisor. Does she have abilities that you admire? What can you learn from her?
- Your ideas and needs are worthy of your supervisor's attention and respect. However, keep in mind that you are dealing with someone in a position of responsibility and authority, so prepare yourself well, be respectful and present facts rather than emotion. Offer positive solutions and show how they are beneficial for your workplace.
- Ask for what you want and need, but realize that you won't always get it.

Five ways to build your relationship assets

1. Treat people well. Be generous and respectful with co-workers. This not only makes life easier for others, but the kindness and respect we show to others usually comes back to us one way or another.
2. Practise good listening skills. Give people your full attention. Ask questions to show you are trying to understand. Make note of people who you think are good listeners and imitate their approach.
3. Think of conflict as a normal part of human relationships rather than a sign of failure or crisis. Try to see situations from the other person's point of view, so you can look at the conflict in a more balanced way. In the aftermath of a conflict, be the one who takes steps to get a strained relationship back on track.
4. Don't criticize co-workers in front of others, but be sure to praise them publicly. Admit your own mistakes and apologize. Forgive the mistakes of others.
5. Spend as much time as you can with people who inspire you and help you to feel resilient.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotions are part of life. Emotional intelligence – the ability to understand and manage emotions in ourselves and others – is a crucial life skill that also helps us deal with certain demands in our work lives. The skills associated with emotional intelligence include:

- understanding and relating to other people's feelings;
- non-verbal communication skills;
- understanding how our emotions affect others;
- the ability to use positive emotions to motivate ourselves and inspire others;
- the ability to manage and control our own feelings when it's important to do so.

No one can control all feelings perfectly, but we all need some emotional control. When people are frequently overwhelmed by emotion, it affects their judgment and ability to make decisions. They also find it more difficult to get along with others and recover when they are upset. Emotional skills help us communicate our positive ideas. They also help us express concerns or negative feedback in a way that improves communication and understanding, rather than upsetting people. That is very important in the workplace.

Emotional intelligence assets:

- ability to calm oneself;
- ability to talk about feelings;
- ability to take a step back and look at a situation objectively;
- ability to see another person's point of view;
- sense of humour;
- being able to allow ourselves to enjoy good feelings;
- ability to distract oneself from bad feelings.



Jamal has just been criticized by a co-worker in front of several people. He knows the criticism was partly valid, but his colleague – who he has never really gotten along with – used language that was harsh and humiliating. Jamal pokes his head into the next cubicle and whispers, “Did you hear what that jerk said to me? I’m going to march right down to his office and tell him exactly what I think.”

“I have a better idea,” says his friend Zach. “Let’s go grab a coffee.”

When they sit down together, Zach says, “You have a right to be offended, but don’t go rushing in when you’re upset. You might make the situation worse. Here’s what I’d do,” he continues. “Give yourself until tomorrow to cool off, then send him a polite e-mail and ask if you can have a word with him. Don’t get yourself worked up before you go in there.”

Then he asks Jamal, “Do you think any of the criticism was justified?”

“Well, it wasn’t my best work,” says Jamal.

“OK. Start with that,” suggests Zach. “Tell him you’re going to rewrite those sections of the report. Then tell him how it felt to be criticized publicly, but use neutral language. Even though he was partly in the wrong, it won’t help to make him defensive. Say that in the future you’d like to talk about that kind of thing in private.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” says Jamal. “I’ll think carefully about how I handle this.”

Five ways to build your emotional intelligence

1. Be aware of your emotions and how they affect you. Try to act and react on the basis of thoughts and ideas, instead of feelings.
2. Empathize. Pay attention to the feelings of others and ask questions. It will show you are interested and also help you understand how they feel.
3. Be mindful of how you express strong feelings. Avoid accusations and don’t exaggerate your feelings to make a point. Give people information rather than a display of emotion. Pay attention to your body language and other ways that you communicate non-verbally. Non-verbal communication, which we are often unaware of, can have a big impact on how people interpret our words and actions.
4. When you’re feeling bad, keep reminding yourself that you have felt bad before and always felt better eventually. You won’t feel this way forever.
5. Invest in your emotional well-being by making time for social networks and activities that energize you and add to your enjoyment of life.



Competence

Sometimes we feel like we can *make things happen* in our lives. Other times, it seems like things happen to us and are beyond our control. Most people's lives are a mix of the two. However, resilient people feel a greater sense of control in their lives because they have a good understanding of their own competence – their knowledge and skills, their ability to set realistic goals and to make plans to accomplish those goals. Competent people are also curious about how the world works and they use that curiosity to help them learn and improve their skills.

Workplace competence helps us feel comfortable in our jobs and equips us to deal with workplace demands. It comes from a combination of our general education and abilities, and the feeling that we have the specific knowledge and skills for the job we are asked to do.

Competence assets:

- problem solving and reasoning skills;
- intelligence, a good overall education and training specific to our jobs;
- the ability to take decisive action;
- perseverance;
- knowing when to ask for help;
- a love of learning.



Nadine is struggling with a new responsibility. She's just been handed an important new monthly task and, although she attended a training seminar, she's finding the software hard to use. "I really don't feel on top of this and it's stressing me out," she says to herself. "I'm going to contact the IT department to see if someone can come down and give me a bit more training. That's better than struggling for a week to figure this out on my own and getting behind in my work."

Five ways to build workplace competence

1. Ask for training when you need it. If you don't feel properly equipped to do your job, it is far more productive to seek the training you need than to try to get by without the proper tools.
2. Don't be afraid to ask questions. The "stupid" questions are the ones we don't ask when we want to appear more competent than we really are.
3. Take advantage of outside training opportunities such as conferences and night or weekend courses. Read publications relevant to your field of work.
4. Get involved in community organizations. Experience, skills and confidence gained through volunteering or serving on a community board of directors are often useful in the workplace.
5. Talk to people who know more than you do. Other competent people are some of our greatest learning assets.

Optimism



Maria's new boss has just handed back the first project proposal she's written for him.

"It seems like you didn't proofread this carefully enough," he begins. "Read it out loud to yourself and you'll see what I mean. It also takes too long to get to the point. I need a rewritten proposal by Thursday morning."

"Yikes," she thinks. "Well, it could have been worse. At least he's giving me a chance to fix this."

"Thanks for the feedback," she says to her supervisor. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Later she thinks, "OK, this is my chance to show that I can take direction and do something positive with it. And if I can really improve this, I'll know how my supervisor likes his proposals to look."

Optimistic people are happier and more productive than pessimists. They tend to see adversity as temporary and look on obstacles as opportunities. But optimism is not simply the blind belief that things will turn out well. Healthy optimism is authentic. It's based on knowledge, experience, a realistic understanding of our own capabilities, and the ability to assess situations. In the workplace, optimism is especially important when we experience the challenges, and even failures, that are a normal part of work experience.

According to long-time optimism researcher Martin Seligman, of the University of Pennsylvania, optimistic people are less likely to develop what he calls "learned helplessness," a state of mind where people have learned to see themselves as having no ability to control a situation. Learned helplessness increases the risk of depression and reduces people's ability to think and act productively. Seligman's work has also shown that people become more optimistic by learning how to think optimistically, that is, to challenge their negative thinking patterns, especially those involving self-blame.

Optimism assets:

- confidence in your skills and abilities;
- ability to judge risks;
- ability to see the positive side of tough situations;
- knowing how to look at negative situations in several ways;
- supportive family and community.

Five ways to build your optimism assets

1. Coach yourself to see bad situations as temporary setbacks rather than permanent disasters. Most are.
2. Don't catastrophize or exaggerate the negative impacts of bad situations. When something goes wrong, don't waste time on self-blame. Instead, look for even one small step you can take to improve the situation.
3. Enjoy and take credit for your accomplishments without being egotistical. Celebrating success helps to feed optimism.
4. Learn to challenge your negative thoughts and beliefs. Negative ideas, which are often inaccurate, help to keep bad feelings in place.
5. Look for the positive in negative situations. Many failures and disappointments offer a chance for growth – a lesson that can be learned, an opportunity to improve.

Coping Skills

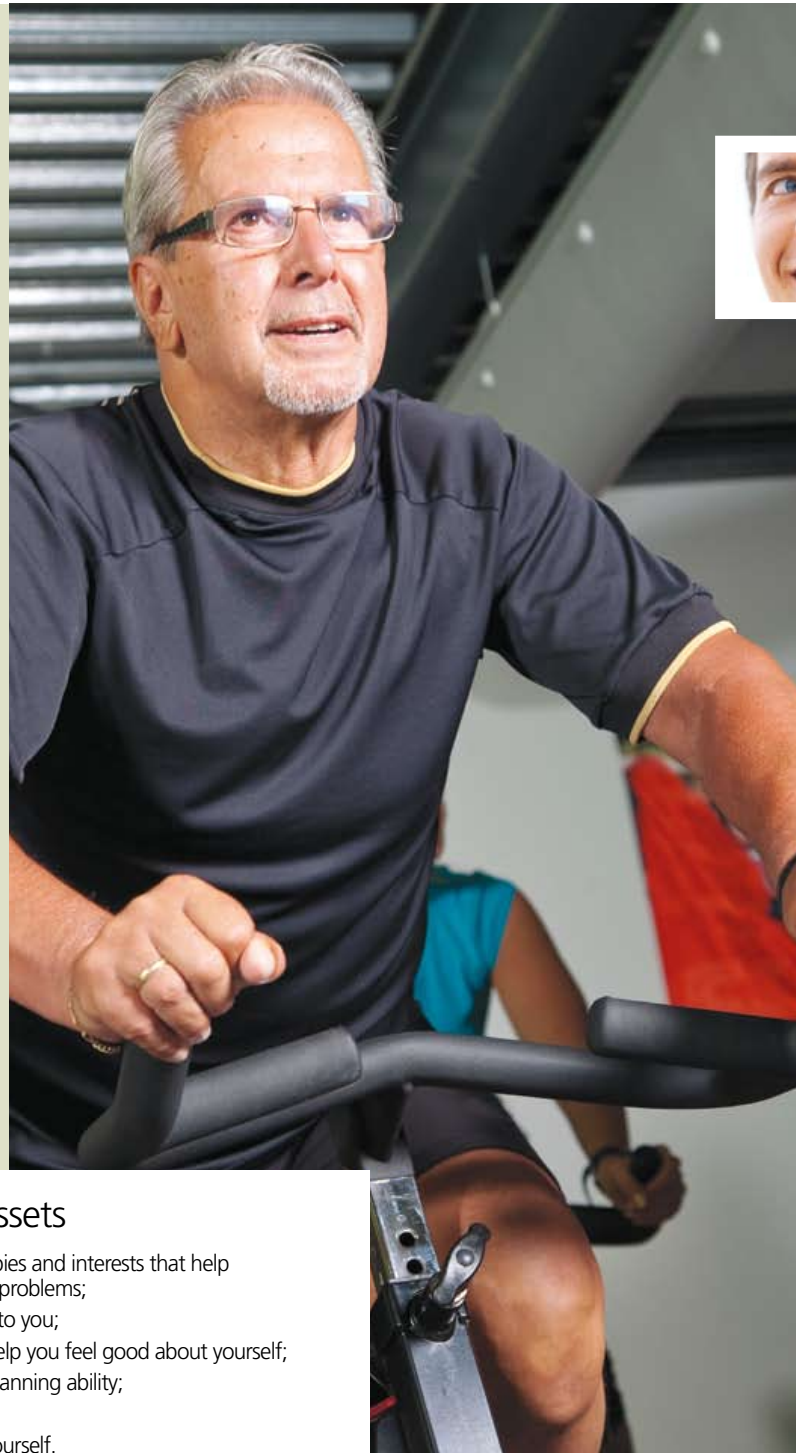
Coping skills are the strategies we use to reduce stress and get through the difficult situations that cannot be avoided. These skills are essential in the workplace because, in spite of our best planning and efforts, everyone experiences stressful situations and setbacks.

Some methods of coping, such as heavy drinking, drug use, or bad-mouthing people, can be harmful or destructive. Positive coping strategies include:

- taking action to deal with the source of stress itself;
- seeking emotional support or sympathy from others;
- avoiding stressful situations and people when possible;
- making time for enjoyable activities that get your mind off of stress;
- looking after your health and well-being by getting enough rest, eating well and getting enough exercise;
- being able to slow down and give yourself time to think; not all problems require an immediate solution;
- writing down your thoughts and then setting a time to think about them later;
- developing ways to refocus your attention away from negative and harmful thoughts and situations;
- clearing your mind through deep breathing, meditation, visualization or other relaxation techniques that you find helpful.

Coping skills assets

- Favorite activities, hobbies and interests that help distract you from your problems;
- Friends who will listen to you;
- Social networks that help you feel good about yourself;
- Problem-solving and planning ability;
- Healthy lifestyle;
- Taking time to enjoy yourself.



Armand's company announced layoffs today. Luckily, Armand didn't lose his job, but he is concerned that his responsibilities will increase due to the reduced work force. As he leaves the office he's wondering, "Am I going to have to work late more often? Will there be even more pressure to meet deadlines?"

Armand decides to stop at the gym before he goes home. He usually feels good after a workout. While he's walking the treadmill, Armand starts to make a plan. "I wonder if I would be allowed to work from home a day or two a week, to save the commuting time. Maybe my job will change and I'll need more training. I should talk to my supervisor tomorrow so I know what I'm dealing with."

When Armand leaves the gym, some of his stress is gone and he has a plan about what to do next.

Five ways to build your coping skills

1. Keep a mental list of the things that help you cope with difficult situations and use them when you're having a tough time.
2. Remember that, even if you can't eliminate a problem, feeling a little bit better is a whole lot better than not feeling better at all.
3. Stay connected to people who can help you cope and go to them for help when you need them.
4. Make time for down time. Take your breaks and vacations. You are entitled to them and they can help you avoid burn-out.
5. Learn to break problems down into parts so you can identify the aspects that you have some control over. Make a plan to change the things you have the power to change and how to live a little more easily with the parts you cannot change.



More Workplace Resiliency Strategies

Remember the big picture

So often at work, and in other aspects of life, we get caught up in moment-to-moment issues: How am I going to get all these e-mails answered in the next 15 minutes? How am I going to juggle all of my tasks and responsibilities today? That's normal, and necessary, at times. But don't forget to step back and reflect on the big picture. It will help you keep your long-term goals in mind and enable you to put minor problems into perspective.

Perceptions can be wrong

We all have perceptions and little theories about people – what they are thinking, what they want from us, what their motivations are. Perceptions are real and part of human social interaction, but they are often inaccurate. When our perceptions are wrong, we can misjudge people, worry needlessly and draw the wrong conclusions. If a perception about a co-worker is affecting the way you do your job, causing you anxiety, or affecting your relations with that person, check it out. The reality may not be quite what you think.

More information

Books:

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work, by Richard Carlson, published by Hyperion, 1998.

Social Intelligence, The New Science of Human Relationships, by Daniel Goleman, Bantam 2006.

Working with Emotional Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman, Bantam 1998.

The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success, by Steven J. Stein and Howard E. Book, Wiley, 2006.

Make Your Workplace Great, The 7 Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization, by Steven J. Stein, Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment, by Martin Seligman, Free Press, 2002.

Web sites:

The Web site of the Psychology Foundation of Canada has more downloadable resources related to workplace mental health along with information and resources about children's mental health and parenting.

Visit us at: www.psychologyfoundation.org

American Psychological Association Help Centre. The Road to Resilience
<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/>

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The Psychology Foundation of Canada

The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) is a national registered charity that supports parents and strengthens families through a number of initiatives including creating educational resources, developing training programs for professionals, and delivering community-based education. Founded in 1974 to promote the understanding and use of sound psychological knowledge to better people's lives, the Foundation is guided by a Board of Trustees comprised of psychologists and business and community leaders. PFC's programs, like *Kids Have Stress Too!*®, *Parenting for Life and Diversity in Action*, help Canadians better understand how to manage situations and relationships more effectively at home, school, community and work. To find out more, or to order materials, please visit PFC's Web sites at www.psychologyfoundation.org or www.kidshavestresstoo.org.

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