

# Science, Support and Stories - the 3S approach to building your resilience



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Resilience is currently a hot topic in HR circles, with direct links to absenteeism and sickness absence. Here's the '3S' approach to building your personal resilience.

Firstly, pay attention to the **Science**. Robert Sapolsky is professor of biology, neuroscience and neurosurgery at Stanford University. A leading authority on stress and resilience, Sapolsky has identified the four core stressors as:

- Feeling that you have *no control* over the adversities in your life
- Being *unable to predict the outcome* of stressful situations
- *Lacking outlets for the frustrations* caused by the stressors
- Lack of *social support*.

Looking at the first two of these, it's immediately obvious why so many staff find organisational restructuring stressful. Fortunately, as we shall see, science can also provide us with insights on how to become more resilient in the face of these challenges.

Take your **Support** seriously. Imagine that you are on a charter jet, bound for your holiday destination. In the seat next to you is an unaccompanied child. Suddenly an announcement is made that the cabin oxygen system has failed and all passengers should don oxygen masks immediately. You feel your breath shortening and your chest tighten as the oxygen in the cabin starts to thin, and then the oxygen masks drop down from their overhead containers. The question is: *whose oxygen mask should you put on first? Yours, or the one for the young child next to you?*

The answer is: *you should take care of yourself first, because then you'll be better able to help the child*. This example illustrates a wider principle - if you don't look after yourself properly, you'll be less able to help others. So, fight the inner voice that makes you feel guilty if you treat yourself to a weekend away with some friends. Let your family fend for themselves for a few days. They'll feel the benefit when you come back relaxed and refreshed. Get better at noticing your alarm calls before they turn into trip wires. Alarm calls are the early warning signs that you're getting stressed (eg, difficulty sleeping, feeling irritable). Trip wires are the (unexpected) signs that it's all got too much - you suddenly burst into tears or shout at someone. So, take your alarm calls seriously and look after yourself before things reach crisis point.

For many of us, a key source of support is social contact with other people. Robert's Sapolsky's work on animal behaviour indicates that, in terms of stress management, you're better off being a chimpanzee with lots of friends rather than a becoming a high-status chimp. The latest research into stress suggests that individuals who seek, and offer, high levels of social support in particularly challenging circumstances experienced greater health and wellbeing than their more self-reliant colleagues.

But choose your support carefully. Julian Fellowes (novelist and scriptwriter of *Downton Abbey*) describes some people as radiators, others as drains. The radiators in your life are the people who warm you - they make you feel good. The drains are people who leave you feeling anxious, miserable or depleted. Part of your resilience strategy should be maximising the time you spend with radiators, and reducing your contact with drains.

The third 'S' in this approach to building resilience is to consciously and deliberately choose the **Story** that you tell yourself about your situation. Most of us have a steady stream of commentary running through our minds about our lives and how well we are doing. During times of increased stress the story can become *'this is awful. It's so unfair. I can't cope'*. Some of us are quite prone to this kind of internal narrative, but fortunately the research into this area suggests that (a) we can train ourselves to think more positively and (b) positive thinking yields specific health benefits. Let's be clear, I'm not suggesting that we all adopt a naïve belief that 'everything is just fine and dandy, and there's bound to be a happy ending'. What I am suggesting, however, is that we should deliberately reframe our interpretation of what is going on.. So, instead of thinking - *'I'm dreading this meeting, my heart is pounding and I can feel my stomach churning'*, we should say to ourselves *'this meeting is going to be challenging, and I can feel my body preparing itself to meet the test'*. As with all the other suggestions in this article, science tells us that simple strategies can make a big difference.

## References

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