



Resilience: how to build it within yourself and your staff

▲ *Tulsi van der Graaff BA (Psych), LLB, Dip Leg Prac*

With significant change, workplace stress and other pressures on pharmacists and pharmacy staff, resilience is a key attribute that is more important than ever. Resilience, the ability to bounce back in times of challenge and change, can be developed and learned. There are many strategies and steps that can help you cope during difficult and stressful periods in the work environment.

You are very stressed at work with too many deadlines. An employee in your business has just lost a parent. Two colleagues have noticeable tension and conflict. You have been feeling tired and unwell. You feel let down by a family member. You wonder what's wrong with you because you just can't seem to get motivated. Another employee is going through a divorce. There is so much work and everyone feels snowed under. One employee bursts into tears because it all feels too much. Another employee has a back injury causing him significant pain. There are changes in the business that everyone is finding challenging. Every day someone seems to have a new issue, feel unwell or communicates in a way that adds tension.

These are typical struggles we face day to day (hopefully not all at once) and they're the kinds of situations that place greater stress on you, the people you work with and the business.

It is likely that there will be times that you're feeling like you can manage these significant personal and work issues. You might feel positive and strong, even in the face of change and challenge. At other times, it just feels too overwhelming. You might even look around and feel like everyone is doing fine and you're just glad others don't know how much you're falling

apart inside. Or you might be wishing employees around you could take a crash course in resilience.

Whatever your particular situation, the truth is, in general, everyone has their own hidden struggles. You're not alone if you're feeling overwhelmed, if you're not managing as well as you could or you're wondering what is going on with people around you.

Yet it is also true that some of us are more resilient and can bounce back more quickly than others.

So what is the secret to this thing called resilience? How do some people seem to recover well from adversity while others fall apart or just barely manage?

This leads us to bigger questions such as; is it possible to become more resilient, to be more effective at facing life's challenges, and can you help those around you do the same? The short answer is yes. The longer answer is explored below.

What is resilience?

Many definitions of resilience tend to focus on this idea of being able to bounce back in times of challenge.¹ We do need to take care with these kinds of definitions however, to ensure that we don't feel the pressure to 'bounce back' and show the world that we're doing great when deep down we're not.

AFTER READING THIS ARTICLE, THE PHARMACIST SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

- identify techniques to help build resilience within themselves;
- list strategies to improve staff resilience;
- describe methods of improving communication to help resolve conflict with staff and customers within the pharmacy.

The 2016 Competency Standards addressed by this activity include: 2.3, 2.4, 4.1, 4.3, 4.6



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CPD

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This activity has been accredited for 0.75 hour of Group One CPD (or 0.75 CPD credit) suitable for inclusion in an individual pharmacist's CPD plan, which can be converted to 0.75 hour of Group Two CPD (or 1.5 CPD credits) upon successful completion of relevant assessment activity. Accreditation expires: 01/04/2021

Resilience is not: stoicism, pretending everything is okay, keeping 'it' together all the time, numbing emotions, saying you're 'fine', refusing to talk to people about your problems, shutting people out, 'acting' strong or positive, or putting on a brave face.

Of course, in pharmacy, there may be times where you have to put on a brave face. The key is to ensure that shutting down the emotions and pretending you're okay is not your 'go to' strategy at all times.

People with higher levels of resilience face similar problems, stresses and challenges. They also experience a range of human emotions like anger, frustration, anxiety, fear, sadness and depression. The difference tends to involve a greater range

of positive emotions in the mix, offsetting the more challenging emotions.² As we continue, think about how you could interweave more positive emotions into your life through a change in thinking, action or strategy.

Resilience is strength and courage through feeling and acknowledging emotions, not suppressing them, and taking the steps needed to change the situation, adjust or get to a place of acceptance, understanding or peace.³

Everybody has some resilience. Studies show us that resilience is an innate resource, a strength within each one of us. Luckily, it's also a quality that can be developed and strengthened.⁴

It is also important to note that sometimes the experiences we face at work and in life can be tragic, traumatic and require a significant period, if not a lifetime, to heal. The resilience strategies we're about to explore still apply, but it's always important to be gentle, accepting and supportive of yourself and those around you who may be going through a deeply painful time. If you or someone has experienced significant trauma, professional support is often needed.

So let's take a look at some important actions and strategies that can help you and others become more resilient.

Take stock: in what ways are you resilient?

You have your own special brand of resilience. Think about a time when you've experienced hardship in your life. What did you do to help yourself? How did you get through it? Your answers will highlight the key resilience strategies that you already have in your resilience 'toolbox'.

You might have reached out to family and friends, retreated for a while, sought some support through counselling or therapy, gone for long walks or dived in to a good book or a TV series.

There are different strengths that can serve as foundations for resilience, like an ability to reach out, an easy temperament, being trusting, helping others, being able to manage challenging emotions or having faith that your life matters and has meaning. A very powerful way to develop resilience is to identify the kinds of strengths you already have and to build on these.⁵

It's also important to remember, that everyone is different in how they perceive and assess experiences and how they are impacted by stressful situations.⁶ So if you feel that, at this point, you're not as resilient as you'd like, the following strategies may assist you.

Your attitude

The way you look at life and see what is happening around you is very important to your capacity to bounce back.

Research tells us that through changing your attitude to life, you can change the way you experience its challenges. Becoming aware of the way you think and your emotions and attitudes, can help you to make (different) choices about how you act, which can in turn help you to manage your behaviour during stress. This is also known as developing your emotional intelligence.⁷

Here are two key attitudes to adopt that can make all the difference to how you experience and manage life.

Attitude number 1: Acceptance

Accept that life is a struggle and at different times it really isn't easy. This doesn't mean adopting a pessimistic or negative approach. Instead of saying 'why me?', it's about recognising that you're in this boat called life, and while sailing you will encounter high winds and rough seas. It happens to everyone and it is... just life. It is very tempting to want to shut down the feelings and make the

discomfort go away. Unfortunately, it's not always possible and your best option is to notice and accept these feelings.

For example, if you've heard that a customer you were close to has passed away, you might understandably feel upset and sad. Acceptance could be talking to yourself and saying something like, 'wow, I feel strange and upset and sad. I know it's very normal to feel upset but I am surprised how much it has hit me. It's okay though. I'm going to focus on accepting this is how I feel, be gentle with myself and keep reminding myself it's okay to feel sad'.

Or if you're dealing with a staff member who is very sad, you could respond with empathy and encourage them to accept how they're feeling. That could look like 'I can see you're really sad. It's so hard losing a lovely customer isn't it? This part of the job is not easy—getting to know really special people and then losing them. Maybe after work we can all get together and chat about what we loved about her'.

Acceptance is a very powerful strategy, encouraging resilience and adjustment even in cases of trauma.⁸ It can also help you connect to a greater sense of peace and wellbeing.

Attitude number 2: Gratitude

Be grateful for what you do have.

Every moment that life goes smoothly is a moment to be appreciated. Think about what you are grateful for in your life. In work meetings, you might like to include a focus on what each of you is grateful for in relation to the work and each other. Consciously focusing on what you are grateful for each day will help you feel happier and more positive.

One study⁹ found that those who focused on gratitude experienced higher levels of positive emotion and were also more likely to have helped someone or offered emotional support to another.

You could enhance your relationships with your staff by expressing your gratitude and appreciation to them. For example, 'Suzy, the way you deal with all the customers and staff in such a positive, kind and friendly way is such a support to us all. Each day you put a smile on so many faces. Your positivity and hard work really make a difference

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to this pharmacy and we're all so glad you're working here'.

An email to each of your staff after a particularly busy time, expressing what you've appreciated about each of their contributions is also a wonderful way to express gratitude, encourage your staff and develop a more resilient workplace overall. Remember that when you are expressing gratitude and appreciation try to identify what specifically you appreciate about what they do, the impact that they have and why it makes a difference to the workplace.

Self-care

You've probably heard of this concept of 'self-care'. You might even say 'oh yes, I need to do more of that!'. It's essentially what individuals do (or wish we did) to maintain life, health and wellbeing.¹⁰ It's so important to feeling balanced and to managing the stresses of life, yet often we just don't do it and the research¹¹ shows that it's a big key to resilience. Supporting and encouraging yourself and your staff to engage in self-care practices that they relate to can enhance their resilience and help them to cope more effectively during challenging times. This was shown to be highly effective for oncology nurses who are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of work-related stress through witnessing significant human suffering, distress and loss.¹¹

Have a think about what you could include in your life and workplace that could contribute to a greater sense of health and wellbeing. For example, the introduction of a quiet room to support self-care for nurses to relax, unwind, debrief, meditate or just take a few moments to themselves had a significant impact, resulting in greater satisfaction, wellbeing and staff retention.¹²

While a quiet room may not be possible, there are other ways of supporting staff self-care, through, for example, encouraging staff to debrief, attend classes that might be of interest with a focus on relaxation, meditation or yoga, or to take a break, even for a few minutes, to get some fresh air and look at the sky. Meditation, even for ten minutes, has been shown to be significant in supporting resilience and reducing the impact of stress and symptoms of depression and anxiety.¹³

One way to encourage more social support in the workplace is to express interest in how people are doing, who they are and their lives in general. By 'modelling' this kind of interaction, you create more trust, engagement and encourage connection among staff.

Reaching out: giving and receiving social support

Social support is a strong buffer against psychological problems and supportive of wellbeing generally. In the work environment, it is clear that a feeling of belonging and connection between staff has a significant impact on their resilience and wellbeing.¹⁴

Does your workplace foster connection and support? Do people talk, listen, support each other and experience meaningful connection? Do they have workplace supported activities and times to get to know each other? If the answer is no, your workplace may be missing an important opportunity to develop staff resilience. In my work supporting organisations to manage change and communication and conflict challenges, it is very clear that where there is a strong network of support, connection and camaraderie, and particularly if this is supported by the business, staff and workplaces do better. With social support, people are better able to plan ahead, explore alternatives, problem solve and regulate emotion¹⁵ and are more resilient overall.

One way to encourage more social support in the workplace is to express interest in how people are doing, who they are and their lives in general. By 'modelling' this kind of interaction, you create more trust, engagement and encourage connection among staff. Workplaces that frown on conversations among staff fail to recognise that connection like that, supports a more relaxed workplace with greater productivity, happiness and resilience. Try giving yourself an extra two or three minutes to regularly and genuinely inquire about each staff member. Examples of ways to start a conversation are:

- 'How's life treating you?'
- 'How was your weekend?'
- 'How are you managing with kids back at school after holidays?'
- 'You have been working so hard recently, are you managing okay?'

Really listen. That involves eye contact, absorbing what they're saying, putting yourself in their shoes (empathy) and acknowledging the challenges of life and perhaps even saying 'me too' or 'I get it, I also find it challenging', if it's appropriate.

Now if, on reflection, this is exactly the opposite of what you've been doing, then it's time to have a staff meeting and reset values and expectations. You might say 'I've realised that I probably don't encourage a relaxed environment as much as I could. I'd like to do things differently because I want you all to feel happy and supported at work. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how we could do things differently. You might have to be a little patient with me but I'm going to try to do better'.

Some options to develop the social support further in your workplace, could be to invite staff to a dinner to express your appreciation, have regular and a variety of social gatherings, fundraise for a cause that you're all committed to, get together to plant trees to support the environment, or find a few minutes to eat delicious cake together.

It's also important to remember that it's not just about having the social support around you; you need to make use of that support. This issue takes me back to a resilience workshop I facilitated. One participant who was struggling at work said, 'I don't share things that are happening because I want to appear strong and I don't want to burden my family or be vulnerable'.

Anger, resentment and irritation are very normal emotions but if they're particularly strong and enduring they can get in the way of your wellbeing, good relationships and managing life.

I asked her how that was working for her and her reply was 'it's not!'. At that moment, she had a sudden realisation, looked at me wide eyed and said, 'I've got to do something about this...maybe I'm not coping at work because I'm not letting anyone in at home'.

It is all very well to have good relationships around you, but if you're not reaching out, you're missing your opportunity for support and connection... and resilience.

Managing challenging emotions

Anger, resentment and irritation are very normal emotions but if they're particularly strong and enduring they can get in the way of your wellbeing, good relationships and managing life. How do you deal with these kinds of emotions with resilience?

One way to approach it is to recognise that when you or others have those very intense emotions to challenging situations, it is creating what we often refer to as a 'fight or flight response'. It awakens the prehistoric brain that previously would respond to that wild animal (the threat) by attacking it with a club (fight) or running as fast as your legs could carry you (flight). These days the threat might be an angry colleague or customer, but the same response is triggered and it stops our reasoning and rational response. If you react in the moment, you can say and do things that you'll regret and that can potentially damage and destroy relationships.

So what do you do? Awareness is the first step. It is important to recognise your particular 'triggers', the things that cause you to react or overreact. Triggers are situations or interactions that often take you back to your childhood or a

challenging or traumatic experience. Your response is not just what is happening in the here and now. It is like feeling targeted by that school yard bully all over again or feeling like you're being rejected and dismissed more intensely than another person might feel it, because that's what your mother always did. When you recognise you're being triggered, give yourself some time out, take a long pause, a deep breath, and try to be conscious of what is happening. Try to say less rather than more. Perhaps write down how you're feeling or reach out to a trusted person and talk about the situation.

It is also important to note that the way you engage with your staff could make them feel threatened or 'triggered' as well. If you overly question them, stand over them, or cause them to feel that they are not trusted, they will be unable to think and work as well and will be more susceptible to burnout because of the ongoing release of cortisol, the 'stress hormone'. For example, as David Rock states, even "the mere phrase 'Can I give you some advice?' puts people on the defensive because they perceive the person offering advice as claiming superiority. It is the cortisol equivalent of hearing footsteps in the dark".¹⁶

On the flip side, if you support your staff, have clear expectations, appreciate their work, give them opportunities to make decisions and treat everyone fairly, it generates more productivity, creativity, openness and resilience.

In situations where there is conflict and perhaps the communication is not going so well, one way to manage your emotions is to calmly say something like 'I'm feeling very uncomfortable with this conversation. I want to work with you/help you/talk about this, but it's feeling a little challenging right now. How about we catch up in a bit and talk it through?'. Or you can say, 'I really want to talk to you, but I can't work or think while you're shouting at me'. It's much harder to bounce back from difficult interactions, particularly when you feel like you haven't said what should have been said.

You can prepare yourself for these kind of situations by learning how to raise issues appropriately. One formula that could help you is the 'I've noticed, I feel and what I'd like' formula:

I've noticed... that different times when you ask me to do something you say it with frustration and a tone and in front of others. When this happens... *I feel* humiliated and disrespected and I can't think. *What I'd like...* is for you to ask me to come into the office to talk about work so that we can work together and I understand what is needed.

Often it's the people challenges that stay with us, feel like an ongoing burden and make it hard for us to bounce back. Developing your communication and conflict resolution skills can make all the difference to enhancing relationships and being able to let go of anger, resentment and irritation.

Self compassion

Do you know those critical voices that say 'you're not good enough', 'you failed', 'you should be perfect'? Be careful what you say to yourself, because you're listening. We do have to be careful because we tend to give ourselves the worst messages and say things to ourselves that we would never say to another and it's very undermining.

Try to be aware of the messages you tell yourself. Consistently, try to refocus on being gentle, loving and accepting of yourself. Treat yourself as you would a much-loved friend. Try to recognise when you're putting too much pressure on yourself to be or do more than you are capable of, particularly if that pressure is causing you extra stress. It could be reminding yourself 'I don't have to be perfect. I just have to do my best'.

Talking to a trusted friend or a counsellor is an excellent way to get more understanding and overcome some of these negative messages you may be telling yourself. Self-compassion is a key strategy to support your wellbeing and your ability to bounce back in times of challenge.

Conclusion

There are so many ways you can develop resilience, and even taking some small steps can make a significant difference to how well you and your staff manage change, challenges and stress in the workplace and in your lives. Life and work isn't easy, but with greater resilience, you and your staff will be able to bounce back even when times are tough. ●



1.5

CPD CREDITS
GROUP TWO

Resilience: how to build it within yourself and your staff

This unit attracts up to 1.5 Group Two CPD credits. Accreditation number: A1904AJP2. Accreditation expires: 01/04/2021.
Each question has only ONE answer.

1. Which one of the following options is UNLIKELY to support you in becoming more resilient?

- A** When you're feeling sad, acknowledging how you're feeling.
- B** Shutting down your feelings and pretending you're strong to everyone around you.
- C** Talking to trusted people.
- D** Reaching out to others.
- E** Engaging in self-care strategies like taking a break, doing some meditation or activities that support relaxation.

2. True or False? Once you do develop effective resilience strategies, you will never have feelings of sadness, anger or irritation again.

- A** True
- B** False

3. To improve staff resilience, which of the following strategies could you use?

- A** Make more time to talk to your staff and listen to them.
- B** Encourage breaks when possible.
- C** Express your appreciation and gratitude for what they do.
- D** Encourage shared activities outside of work.

- E** Express empathy when times are challenging.
- F** All the above.

4. Jessica, a staff member, approaches to you to explain her grandmother is very sick and she needs to take some time off to be with her. You are very busy in the pharmacy and can't see how you will get through the next few days without her. Which of the following options is the most APPROPRIATE way to communicate with Jessica about her application for leave?

- A** Empathetically tell Jessica that she can have three days off, but you can't approve any more time off than that, as it is a very busy time in the pharmacy and you need all hands on deck.
- B** Calmly enter the conversation with empathy, appreciating the emotional state Jessica may be in. You say to Jessica that you understand how important this must be for her and that you're sorry that her grandmother is so unwell. You then say that you want to work with her to ensure she gets to spend time with her

grandmother. You ask Jessica for more information as to how many days of leave she needs.

- C** Ask Jessica to email the manager, who is in charge of the rosters, as you don't have time for this conversation at the moment.
- D** Explain kindly to Jessica that she can take the time off if she brings in a carers certificate from her GP, as this is the correct protocol for the pharmacy.

5. Which of the following statements is INCORRECT?

- A** Social connection is important for resilience but it is not enough to have people around you, you also need to reach out to them.
- B** The attitude of acceptance is about accepting and coming to terms with life being a struggle at times rather than questioning 'why me?'.
- C** Gratitude can help us feel happier but only when life is going smoothly.
- D** When you feel threatened, you tend to go into flight or fight mode. One way of addressing this is to take some time, give yourself some space and try not to say too much in the moment.

FURTHER READING

Managing stress in pharmacy. Creating a healthier working environment in pharmacy by managing workplace stress. Practical advice for Australian pharmacists and pharmacy support staff. 2018. Available at <https://www.supportforpharmacists.org.au/managing-stress-in-pharmacy-au-2018.pdf> and <https://ajp.com.au/education-resources/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tulsi van de Graaff is a partner at Brave People Solutions, providing human resource solutions to organisations to create impressive teams, great people and inspiring leaders. Tulsi is a former lawyer with a background in psychology, mediation, counselling and investigation. Her specialist area is in communication improvement, resolving serious conflict and mending broken relationships in the workplace. Tulsi's expertise includes organisational cultural change, leadership and team development, emotional intelligence, dealing with challenging behaviours and child protection. More information can be found at bravepeoplesolutions.com.au or by email at tulsi.vandegraaff@bravesolutions.com.au

1. Dictionaries variously define resilience as: the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties (*Oxford Dictionary*); able to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened (*Cambridge Dictionary*); the ability to recover strength, spirits, good humour, etc. quickly; buoyancy (*Collins Dictionary*).
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