

CornellHealth

Tips & information to help you thrive

Building Resilience

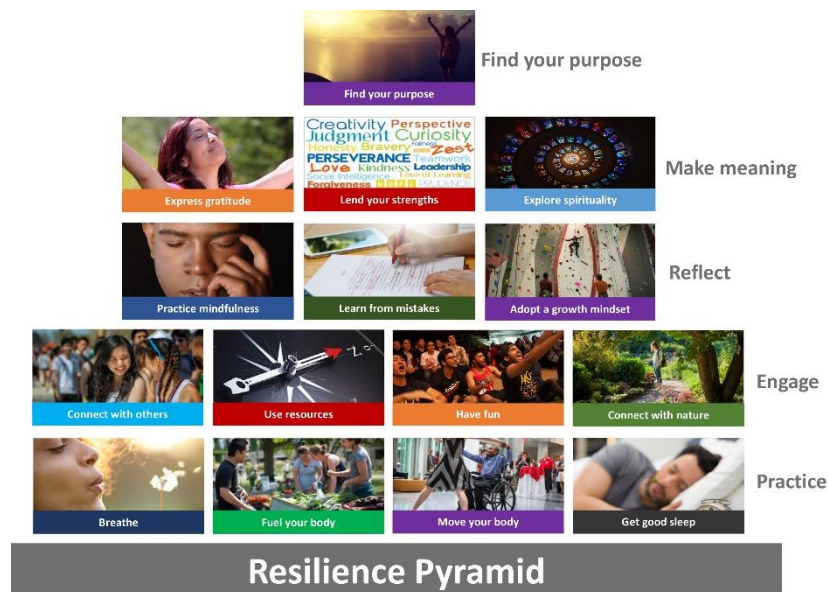
Everyone faces challenges and hardship at times.

Resilience is your ability to cope with and bounce back from stress and adversity, and hopefully even grow through the experience. It is sometimes referred to as “thriving” ... and not just surviving.

Resilient people are more likely to ...

- meet the demands of their academic/work and personal lives successfully
- take action to deal with challenges, problems, and setbacks
- seek support and assistance when they need it
- know when to stop, rest, and replenish inner resources
- have a sense of independence, self-efficacy, and self-worth
- form and maintain positive, mutually-respectful relationships with others
- have a sense of purpose and goals for the future

Resilience is not a fixed state. You may be more resilient at different times in your life than others. Most importantly, resilience can be learned, practiced, developed, and strengthened.



What is resilience?

Resilience is an individual's ability to positively cope with stress and adversity – bouncing back to a previous state of normal functioning, or using the experience of adversity to enhance flexibility and overall functioning. Resilience has multidimensional aspects (*Wong, 2012*) including:

- Cognitive: How events are interpreted (cognitive style, appraisal, attribution) and how daily stressors and life circumstances are negotiated (coping)
- Behavioral: Habits of persistence and endurance in face of obstacles and failures (behavioral practice and reinforcement)
- Motivational: Clear sense of life purpose and commitment (will to live)
- Existential/spiritual: Sense of larger purpose and meaning of human life (meaning and life purpose)
- Relational: Sense of social connectedness, engagement, and altruism
- Emotional: Ability to tolerate negative emotions and rejection and to maintain emotional confidence and hopefulness (emotion regulation, emotional intelligence)

Resilience stems from the interaction of a person with their environment and the resulting processes that either promote well-being or protect them against the overwhelming influence of risk factors.

All individuals will face some challenges to well-being and thriving throughout life. Learning to work through these challenges is necessary for basic survival, but also offers a powerful opportunity for enhancing growth and well-being.

How to build resilience

Social engagement

Cultivating social connections – and avoiding social isolation – is one of the best ways to build resilience. Positive peer relationships and supportive interaction with family, faculty, and staff are known to be important factors in students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

- Find ways to connect with other students in meaningful ways
- Unplug, and interact with others face-to-face
- Join a student group, organization, or team
- Volunteer (you can start at Cornell's Public Service Center)
- Practice random acts of kindness
- Start conversations; ask questions and be an active listener; look people in the eyes and say "thank you"
- Get to know your professor or TA

Self-awareness and self-care

Self-awareness is your capacity to clearly understand your own strengths, weaknesses, emotions, values, natural inclinations, tendencies, and motivation. Self-care refers to behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes that support your emotional well-being and physical health.

- Eat well, move your body, and get enough sleep
- Manage stress
- Practice self-compassion
- Cultivate opportunities for personal growth; develop interests outside of your field or major
- Make time for quiet reflection through meditation, prayer, journaling, yoga, spending time in nature, or practicing gratitude
- Play, and have fun!

Attention and focus

Attention allows you to tune out information, sensations, and perceptions that are not relevant at the moment and instead focus your energy on the information that is important. A benefit of undivided focus is the increased likelihood of achieving a flow state, characterized by Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, as *“the mental state in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity.”*

- Train your mental focus through meditation, visualization, deep breathing exercises, or other techniques
- Focus on one thing at a time
- Avoid multi-tasking
- Unplug; take a break from checking your phone, especially when studying. Turning off your phone (or the sound) will give you periods of uninterrupted focus while preparing for an exam or presentation
- Listen to classical music (or other music without lyrics) or natural soundscapes like ocean waves, wind, or birdsong to tune out stimuli and help you focus on the task at hand

Meaning

Finding meaning is the act of making sense of – and exploring the significance of – an experience or situation. Research shows that cultivating a sense of meaning in your life can contribute more to positive mental health than pursuing happiness.

- Come to understand your purpose: examine your strengths and talents, develop skills you want, recognize your values and pursue interests and passions, and live your own unique combination of these

- Develop realistic goals and work toward them
- Find ways to help others
- Keep a long-term perspective and consider stressors in broader context
- Embrace change
- Reflect on what's going well and what's not
- Explore spiritual or religious practices that fit your world view and values
- Strive to accept what you cannot change; make conscious choices to take action where you can influence a process, outcome, or relationship

“Growth mindset”

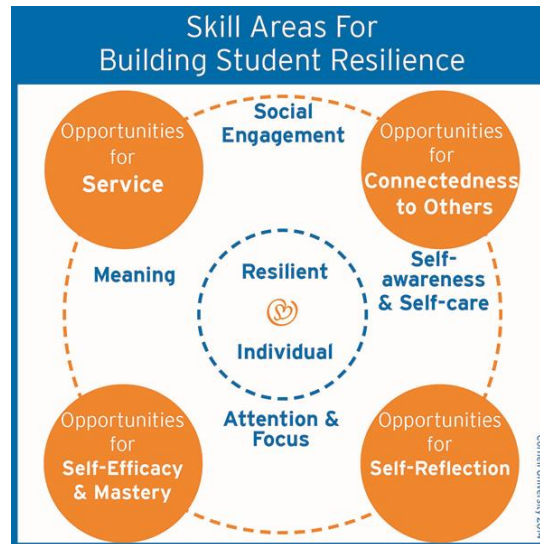
Cultivating a “growth mindset” can be an important part of building resilience. It is the opposite of a “fixed mindset,” when you believe your intelligence and abilities are fixed, innate traits that you can't change. Instead, a “growth mindset” acknowledges that you can learn from challenges, and through these experiences can increase your intellect and abilities.

- Leave the “genius” myth behind – achievement requires hard work, not just natural talent
- Focus on “brain training” – your brain is like a muscle that needs to work to get stronger
- Prioritize learning over approval, and the process over the end result
- View challenges and set-backs as opportunities to grow, to learn something new
- Acknowledge and embrace your imperfections, and try different learning tactics
- Applaud your effort, and not just your inherent skill
- Avoid comparing yourself to others – we all have different strengths and learn differently

Qualities of resilience

The “Framework for Building Student Resilience” below identifies skills and goals that foster and sustain student resilience.

- **In blue:** Skill areas that support resilience (*see details below graphic*)
- **In maroon:** Personal qualities that develop as resilience grows
- **In orange:** The pathways through which students can develop and strengthen their resilience



Personal qualities developed through Social Engagement

- **Generosity:** Being kind in thought and behavior towards others.
- **Integrity:** Being in sync with one's values and beliefs and to consistently behave in ways that reflect those principles. Doing the right thing even when no one is looking.
- **Authenticity:** Being true to one's personality, spirit, or character. Not false or imitative in speech or action.
- **Humility:** Being modest, and able to receive joy from others' success without one's ego getting in the way.

Personal qualities developed through Self-awareness and Self-care

- **Self-regulation:** The capacity to alter one's behaviors based on internal values and social expectations. Behaviorally, it is the ability to act in your long-term best interest, consistent with your deepest values. Emotionally, it is the ability to calm yourself down when you are upset, cheer yourself up when you are down, know when you've exceeded your ability, and know when to seek support from others.
- **Persistence:** A personality trait related to stamina, and "stickability." It is the "voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement." (*Peterson and Seligman*)
- **Tolerance for adversity:** The capacity to endure emotional pain/hardship during an instance of serious or continued difficulty. This means learning to accept, even enjoy, hard work and challenge; adapt to changes and unknowns; turn challenges into opportunities; and use humor to keep things in perspective.
- **Cognitive (re)framing:** Optimism and pessimism both tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. There can be a connection between what you expect and do, and how well your life goes. Cognitive reframing is a practical technique that helps

you notice negative thoughts and replace them with more positive thoughts or perspectives. This is a vital skill for improving confidence and thriving in the midst of adversity.

- **Healthy habits:** Keeping healthy physical habits (getting enough sleep, eating well, [managing stress](#), [keeping alcohol use in check](#), [practicing safer sex](#), etc.) help build a strong foundation for resilience and emotional well-being.

Personal qualities developed through Attention & Focus

- **Focus:** Being able to sustain concentration, attention, and effort to achieve a goal.
- **Curiosity:** A desire to know; inquisitive interest in others' concerns; interest leading to inquiry.
- **Flexibility:** The ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing circumstances; being in the present moment and responding to a situation by changing or persisting with behavior in the service of chosen values.

Personal qualities developed through Finding Meaning

- **Purpose:** Finding value or significance in something; holding a sense of life purpose.
- **Self-acceptance:** Recognizing “oneself” or one's condition without attempting to change it, protest, or exit; the action or process of believing oneself to be adequate or suitable.
- **Gratitude:** An attitude you can choose, even when things are difficult. When things go well, you can be grateful and savor the moment. When things go poorly, you can choose to focus on the positive things your life, and remember that negative situations are temporary.
- **Hope:** A state of mind that leads to optimism. "Hope literally opens us up, removes the blinders of fear and despair and allows us to see the big picture," says the social psychologist Barbara L. Fredrickson.
- **Optimism:** A cognitive outlook or tendency to look upon the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect the most favorable outcome even in difficult times. Confidence and hopefulness in the belief that good outcomes will eventually occur.

Getting help

If you're struggling, we can help. Schedule an appointment with a Cornell Health counselor, or stop by Let's Talk for a free walk-in consultation. Other resources for support – academic, emotional, and social – are listed on Mental Health at Cornell.