

Society for Education in Anaesthesia (UK)
BECOMING MORE RESILIENT



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At the meetings one attends there is often a resilience workshop, and it will be the first one that fills. One can speculate on the reasons for this and the objectives those attending will have, but what is more certain is that as individuals we are becoming more likely to experience burnout, and that mental health issues are more commonly reported. The reasons for this are multiple and complex, but building a reservoir of wellbeing, the key to personal resilience, can be a help in avoiding these problems.

The techniques are simple, but they require repetition to become embedded and protective. They have been codified in recent times by advocates of positive psychology, but are seen throughout all cultures, including the philosophy of ancient Greece, Daoism and others, across the whole of human history. Now

we have evidence from neuroscience, particularly functional MRI scanning, that the brain exhibits plasticity throughout life, and can be trained relatively easily to enhance areas within it that make the individual more able to withstand the challenges of personal and professional life and enable them to behave resiliently.

All approaches to building and maintaining wellbeing have common elements, which are also seen in many self-help books. These are: understanding of one's self and self-mastery, maintenance of physical health, developing a positive approach to life, defining personal goals and

values beyond self, engaging with others, focusing on personal growth, and learning from overcoming challenges. Many also suggest the use of role models to help identify resilient approaches that can be cultivated. The very busy lives most of us lead can make these simple activities appear hard to achieve, but most can be easily integrated into daily life.

Understanding of self can be achieved in a number of ways, and the process can be started by completing a questionnaire on resilience skills, of which there are many available simply by using google, and then reflecting on the results. Reflection generally aids wellbeing, particularly if the model used requires the challenging of one's personal thoughts in an objective way and looking for thought errors – that is looking for personal responses that would not match the interpretation of an external observer. The simple understanding that the personal outcome of any event depends as much on our response to the event as to the event itself, can be a revelation.

The easiest area to change that brings benefit, is that of physical health – having adequate sleep, exercising regularly, eating and drinking sensibly, avoiding smoking and drinking excessively all have significant value. The key to using these is making small changes that are incorporated into daily life – examples are walking rather than taking the car for short trips, good sleep hygiene, using step-counters to encourage increases in activity. There are many exercise apps that are helpful as support for all these.

A positive approach to life begins with an understanding of the real significance of events within our lives. How important is that event (on a scale of 1–10) in the totality of life, and will it matter in six-months' time? If a planned day presents a challenge, accept it, but also be clear that you will come through it – and then when you have come through it,

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consciously acknowledge that you have, and recognise the things that got you through or that went well. Accept that we can fear events and that doing so is normal, makes us perform better and is a protective response. Using these approaches, and adding the expectation that you will come through events which are challenging, becomes a habit with practice and enhances responses across all aspects of life. Cultivating an optimistic outlook here is also useful, as such an outlook is strongly correlated with increased life expectancy, as well as wellbeing. Recently there have been many studies which show that optimism can be enhanced by simple exercises, and there are many easily accessed apps or websites that provide such exercises to allow one to do this.

Defining specific goals in life and having a focus on what one wishes to achieve are important in building wellbeing. What do you want to achieve in the next

five years? What is on your bucket list (and can you start working on any of it to keep it off the bucket list)? What do you really believe in? Paying attention to this area of our lives is often forgotten in general activity, but it gives us the opportunity to think deeply. Such thinking is part of building our mental health, along with activities like mindfulness, meditation and engaging in activities where the level of engagement is such that we lose track of time and of what is going on around us.

Getting involved in new activities, and keeping meaningful contact with others together with small acts of kindness are easy and have a significant personal impact.

Finally, at the end of every day, spending a few moments to highlight three things that went well will support many of the above actions and, with time, build one's wellbeing and allow a more resilient approach to the next problem.

- Simple steps to wellbeing**
- understand self-resilience questionnaires
 - use reflection –look for thinking errors
 - develop a positive approach and perspective
 - take care of personal health – sleep, nutrition, exercise
 - explore personal values and aims regularly
 - keep meaningful contact with others
 - do new activities and have fun
 - look for resilient role models
 - reflect on and highlight what went well every day.