Building Resilience: An Integral Approach

If you’re like most of us, you know someone who does well in the face of adversity; someone who remains steady amidst chaos and sometimes even discovers the otherwise missed opportunities often hidden in challenging circumstances. How do they do it? Were they just born that way? And are the rest of us destined to struggle with feelings of incompetence and doom during difficult times?

While your resilient friends may have a rich history and natural tendencies that support their optimism, they just as easily could have emerged from a challenging upbringing. It turns out that their resiliency is not about the circumstances of their lives, it’s about how they respond to these circumstances!

Resilience is not merely a character trait possessed by a lucky few. It’s a capacity that can be developed, practiced, and improved — and it’s available to each one of us. In fact, according to the American Psychological Association, “Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience.” If that’s true, how do we become more like the people who have learned to rise to the challenges they must face? How do we learn to handle adversity and to effectively bounce back?

STEP ONE: Get to Know Your Adversity Response

An important factor in developing and leveraging our capacity for resilience is to identify our current response to adversity — not just what we believe our response is, but how we actually think, feel, and react during hard times. While there are many factors, including our past experiences, belief systems, and relationships, that influence our adversity response it is ultimately our current thoughts and actions, those alive and kicking today, that determine our responses.

Developing and integrating new ways of responding comes from gaining a deeper understanding of the specific ways we currently limit our capacity for resilience and then developing a tailor-made plan for creating change we want. The first step in this process is becoming truly curious about ourselves — without judgment or blame.

Become an open-minded observer of yourself in times of adversity. When learning to become more aware of yourself, it’s helpful to begin by looking back on a period of time and noticing how you responded to certain situations, people, and events. As you expand your ability to objectively reflect back on your day, you will gain more skill in actually observing yourself in the midst of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Self-observation is a powerful tool that helps you develop the capacity to notice the discrepancies between what you intend and
The Transformative Power of Observation and Practice

Over the years, we all develop habitual ways of responding to events and relationships in our lives. Often, we’re not even aware of our behaviors and communication style, especially when we are under stress. Self-observation and reflection can help us gain insight into the often hidden factors that impact our ability to respond to life’s challenges. When we take time each day to reflect back on our thoughts, feelings and actions, we begin to discover recurring patterns in our responses. By getting to know our adversity response, we develop a deeper understanding of how our reactions affect us and those around us.

Using this new understanding, we can begin to develop a new adversity response. We do this by identifying and practicing new behaviors that are more aligned with who we want to be. While insights can happen quickly, it takes ongoing practice to embody those insights and shift our habitual behaviors and responses into a new way of being. Movement to action is key to creating change because insight without action is simply information, not transformation.

what you are actually creating — between your espoused values and your actual actions — and take steps to bridge the gap.

Here is a simple exercise that can help you get to know and understand your current adversity response. For the next few weeks, take a few moments each evening to look back over your day and note what happened and how you reacted. Notice how you responded within yourself (thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations) and externally (conversations, behaviors, and actions). Ask yourself the following questions and write down your answers in a journal.

- How did you react during times of adversity? More specifically, what patterns of thoughts and behaviors were present during stress and challenge?
- What did you notice occurring in your body? Did you experience tightness in your back or shoulders? Were there changes in your posture or your voice?
- Did you seek the support of others or did you withdraw and try to manage by yourself?
- How did your communication change during times of adversity?
- In what ways did environmental factors, such as your workspace or home, impact or influence your experience of adversity?

Once a week review your notes and see if you begin to notice any patterns in your responses. What are you learning as a result of this exercise? How can you put this learning into action?

2. Seek feedback from others: An outside perspective is particularly useful in helping us to understand what we are up to during times of adversity. When faced with ongoing challenge, our current understanding and perspectives may no longer provide us with the answers and clarity we seek. Find a trusted friend, colleague or coach who can share additional information about what they have noticed about you. They may be able to help you gain insight on reactions that you are unable to see from within your existing viewpoint.

STEP TWO: Create a Personal Plan for Change

Once you have some data and insight into your adversity response, it’s time to move into designing a customized plan to help you develop, practice and increase your level of resilience. It’s important to consider all aspects of your life when identifying effective strategies for improving your ability to remain agile and responsive. Using an integral approach in combination with your adversity response data can help you identify the domains in your life where you struggle the most to remain balanced and optimistic during times of challenge.
The four domains covered in this integral approach are:

- Our intentions, thoughts, and feelings
- Our behaviors, mannerisms and physical self-care
- Our relationships with family, friends, groups, etc.
- Our environment and the systems we use to provide structure

Before you put together your resilience plan, refer to your self-reflection exercise and identify the areas where you experience the most challenge or struggle with adversity. Do you tend to catastrophize or have tunnel vision in the midst of adversity? Does your body become rigid and tight? Do you shut down and limit communication with others? Do you tend to over-schedule yourself and fill your calendar with busywork?

Below are suggested focus areas and steps you can take for building resilience by each integral domain. While you can use this model as an integrated plan and focus equally on all four domains, it’s more effective to focus your initial attention and action in the domain where you need the most support before progressing to the steps in the other quadrants. For example, if your thinking and feeling capacities seem the most compromised, turn your attention to quadrant one. If you struggle with taking care of yourself and taking action during adversity, focus on quadrant two. If you would benefit from seeking support or want to improve your communications during adversity, work with quadrant three. And if you want to address your environment or more effectively use systems for resilience, try the focus areas in quadrant four.

Building Resilience: An Integral Plan*

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<tr>
<th>I. Intentions:</th>
<th>II. Behaviors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus: Manage Your Thinking</td>
<td>Focus: Take Aligned Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify your natural strengths and create a vision of how to leverage them during times of adversity. Help yourself avoid the tendency to “catastrophize” by identifying times when you’ve overcome similar struggles. And practice optimism by looking for the creative opportunities found during difficult times.</td>
<td>Align your behaviors with the vision you created for yourself. Take action on the things where you can make a positive impact — at home and at work. Practice good self-care by starting or continuing with a regular exercise routine, eat well and get enough sleep.</td>
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<th>III. Relationships</th>
<th>IV. Environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus: Build a Network of Support</td>
<td>Focus: Time in Restorative Settings</td>
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<td>Practice authentic communication and transparency in your relationships. Share your struggles and reach out to others for their support and help. Build a culture of resilience in your family and at work by sharing your belief and respect of others and supporting them to take risks and explore new options.</td>
<td>Block out 15 minutes each day on your calendar to spend time in reflection and restoration. Establish a quiet place in your home or office where you can get away by yourself — or better yet, spend some time outdoors learning from beauty and resiliency of nature.</td>
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A successful integral plan incorporates self-observation to help us stay aware of how we are responding in the moment and ongoing practice of new behaviors and responses to create the shifts we are looking for. Each of the focus areas listed in the quadrants above can be supported with observation exercises and/or the specific practice of a new behavior or response.

Let’s say you want to focus on increasing your optimism as a means of developing your new resilience response. A self-observation exercise could include paying attention to how you are doing with looking at your situation from a new perspective of hopefulness and possibility. Stop for a few minutes a couple of times per day to jot down your observations and then journal about what you are observing and learning during a time of self reflection at the end of the day.

A practice approach to building optimism would be to identify a new attitude or behavior that you want to apply to a specific situation, such as coaching your daughter’s soccer team or leading the next sales meeting. For example, when leading the next sales meeting, you could commit to include information about what individual sales reps are doing well in the meeting and you would encourage and motivate the team by reinforcing these positive results, rather than focusing only on how hard they had to work to meet their quarterly goal.

Incorporating weekly journaling into your practice is beneficial as well; making note about what you are learning and how you can use that learning in the future.

**STEP THREE: Put the Plan into Action**

Regular, conscious practice is critical for change. Practice helped you create your current adversity response, and practice will help you develop new habits that will support your desire for increased resilience. To create lasting change, you must move from the initial insights you gained from your self-observation exercises to taking action and applying this new awareness with different behaviors. This action helps you change your perspectives, responses and outcomes as you integrate your insights and behaviors into your daily life and decisions.

The time you spend practicing will reward you handsomely if you invest in it. Sticking with a new practice even during the tough times — especially during the tough times — helps build a strong inner foundation. Along with consistent practice, noting the changes that are occurring is important as well. This lets us know we are on the right track and provides clues about any adjustments we might want to make to our self-observations and practices.

**Putting it All Together**

As we work with observation and practice in the four resilience quadrants, we open ourselves to new challenges and new achievements. An integral approach increases our awareness of how our beliefs, attitudes and perspectives manifest themselves in the various aspects of our lives, and it deepens our understanding of the true benefit of developing new responses in those same areas.

Resilience is a capacity that not only allows us to more effectively manage our response to adversity; it also supports our connection to deeper purpose and meaning in our lives. As we build increased resilience we also re-connect with our own resourcefulness. We learn to trust in our ability to navigate difficult situations and circumstances and from this solid foundation, we are more willing to take action on the things that are most meaningful in our lives. Attending to the capacity of resilience is an invitation to fulfillment that’s open to each of us — what it takes is clear intention, self-awareness, action and commitment.
Susan Muck and Patty McCourt are Managing Partners of Insight Coaching Alliance, a full-service firm that offers coaching services to clients who want to create a greater sense of meaning, fulfillment and engagement in their lives and organizations. With four certified Integral Coaches, ICA offers the personal attention of a dedicated coach and the collective wisdom of a team with more than 30 years of professional coaching experience. For more ideas on specific exercises and practices that will help you make the positive shifts you want in your life, please call us at 541-344-6448 for a complimentary coaching session. And visit our website at www.insightcoachingalliance.com for more information on Insight Coaching Alliance and our personal and organization services.

*The Integral approach outlined in this article is based on the work of Ken Wilber, founder of the Integral Institute and James Flaherty, founder of New Ventures West.