

# Toolkit: Resilience



*Strengthening  
public sector  
leadership for  
New Zealand*

# Resilience

## What this resource is about

Have you ever observed that the same thing can happen to different people, yet the effect on each person is dramatically different? Have you ever wondered why it is that one person will collapse under a set-back, and another will get knocked back for a while and then seem to thrive?

Those who recover and grow quickly following a stressful event exercise resilience. Having resilience is the ability to interpret a setback as short-term, isolated and not permanent. This means that a resilient person believes that they can move on by applying any learning found in the situation and are not stuck in the situation. While some people naturally seem to display more resilience than others, the good news is that you can develop it by using strengths that you already possess.

## The factors of resilience

While it has been observed for centuries that some people have resilience and others just don't, it is only in the last 40 to 50 years that psychologists have been studying resilience and trying to discover the keys to building it as a capability in people. In 1979, Suzanne (Oullette) Kobasa designed the model for describing 'hardiness' as a set of personality traits or a style of functioning. Today, Kobasa's research provides the basis our understanding of resilience.

The diagram following shows the interrelated orientations of hardiness from Ouellette-Kobasa, Maddi, Puccetti, & Zola (1985), and describes the orientations in more detail.

## **Commitment (vs. alienation)**

People high in commitment find it easy to involve themselves actively in whatever they are doing, being generally curious about and interested in activities, things and people.

Resilient people are committed to their lives and their goals, and they have a compelling reason to get out of bed in the morning. Commitment isn't just restricted to their work—they commit to their relationships, their friendships, the causes they care about, and their religious or spiritual beliefs.

## **Control (vs. powerlessness)**

People high in control believe and act as if they can influence the events taking place around them through what they imagine, say and do.

Resilient people spend their time and energy focusing on situations and events that they have control over. Because they put their efforts where they can have the most impact, they feel empowered and confident. Those who spend time worrying about uncontrollable events can often feel lost, helpless, and powerless to take action.

## **Challenge (vs. threat)**

People high in challenge have the expectation that life will change and that the changes will be a stimulus to personal development.

Resilient people view a difficulty as a challenge, not as a paralysing event. They look at their failures and mistakes as lessons to be learned from, and as opportunities for growth. They don't view them as a negative reflection on their abilities or self-worth.



Adapted from Ouellette-Kobasa, Maddi, Puccetti, & Zola, M. A. (1985)

## Resilient thinking and positivity

Martin Seligman is known as the 'father of positive psychology' and sees that *resilient* thinking is the same as *optimistic* thinking.

We discovered that people who don't give up have a habit of interpreting setbacks as temporary, local, and changeable. ("It's going away quickly; it's just this one situation, and I can do something about it.") That suggested how we might immunise people against learned helplessness, against depression and anxiety, and against giving up after failure: by teaching them to think like optimists.

(Seligman M. , 2011)

The diagram below shows the three factors that make up happiness and can correlate with resilience in the following way:



Positive emotion = **Challenge**

You have positive attitudes toward the stress and see that it is a challenge that you can learn from.

Engagement = **Commitment**

You have commitment to yourself, your family, community and cause.

Purpose = **Control**

You have a purpose which drives you. You have a sense of what you can and can't control.

In addition to seeing optimism as important for helping people 'bounce back' following stress, Seligman cites research to support that positive psychology can help people stay well.

## Resilience and leadership

As individuals, increasing our resilience is essential so that we can achieve what we want, and need to in life. However, as leaders becoming more resilient also helps those we lead. Because the foundation for improved resilience is improving how we view stressful situations, we can help improve how a potentially stressful situation can appear to those we lead. (Bartone, 2012)

This means that you can frame an upcoming changed deadline or complex change to process as a challenge—a chance to learn new skills and gain understanding. You can highlight and make explicit, the parts of the job that are controllable. During stressful times you can find ways to increase the commitment of the team members to the group, task or agency.

### **During stressful times, show leadership by:**

Role modeling resilient behaviour: Viewing the experience as something to remain curious about and something to be learned from.

Role modeling self-care which supports resilience: Healthy diet, good sleep-hygiene, exercise and keeping connections intact with your social groups.

Making the learning opportunities of the experience explicit to all of the team members.

Help decide on what can be controlled and what can't. Help facilitate the plan of action.

Facilitate reflection after the stressful experience to help team members make sense of the experience and identify the learning.

Celebrate achievements and create positive stories about the experience for the team to refer back to.

To learn more about how to effectively facilitate on the job learning, see the *Experiential Learning Toolkit* on the LDC website.

## Resilience and your health

Our bodies react to stress by engaging the 'fight, flight or freeze' response, triggering chemical reactions that take a toll on our body. However, resilient people know that they have the ability to choose to intercept stress messages and change how they perceive the situation or 'threat' by changing how they think about the situation—reducing the fight, flight or freeze' response.

### Mindfulness

To increase your resilience it is essential to be aware of your own thought patterns and reactions (physical and emotional) so that you can lower the damage that the chemical reactions of fight, flight or freeze take on your body. If you can increase awareness, you can increase your range of choices. If you can increase your range of choices, you can take more deliberate action rather than just reacting to stressful situations.

To be able to do this you need to increase your mindfulness. Mindfulness is about paying attention to what is going on, not just around you, but of what you are experiencing and the sense that you are making of that.

You will know how easy it is to only pay half-attention during your day, and also what the consequences can be—when someone is looking at you expectantly for an answer to a question that you have heard but not paid attention to. When this happens, you realise that you have 'switched off' for a few moments. Sometimes you are aware of where your thoughts have been, and other times there is no recollection. Increasing your mindfulness means that there will be less 'auto-pilot' moments in your day and you will be able to be aware of stress events and your reaction to them.

Daniel Goleman is well known for his work on Emotional Intelligence, and links being mindful with increasing resilience. Goleman (2011) explains:

Whenever we get so upset we say or do something we later regret (and who doesn't now and then?), that's a sure sign that our amygdala—the brain's radar for danger, and the trigger for the fight-or-flight response—has hijacked the brain's executive centers in the prefrontal cortex. The neural key to resilience lies in how quickly we recover from that hijacked state.

The following are instructions for a daily exercise to increase your mindfulness.

**1. Find a quiet, private place where you can be undistracted for a few minutes—for instance, mute your phone.**

**2. Sit comfortably, with your back straight but relaxed.**

**3. Focus your awareness on your breath, staying attentive to the sensations of the inhalation and exhalation, and start again on the next breath.**

**4. Do not judge your breathing or try to change it in any way.**

**5. See anything else that comes to mind as a distraction—thoughts, sounds, whatever—let them go and return your attention to your breath.**

According to Goleman (2011), those in his study who had practiced this mindfulness technique for an average of 30 minutes a day for eight weeks changed the way their brain was processing stressful events and ‘...said they remembered what they loved about their work—they got in touch with what had brought them energy in the first place’.

To learn more about developing emotional intelligence and self-awareness, see the *Emotional Intelligence Toolkit* on the LDC webpage.

## Maintaining your health

Intercepting and changing the immediate natural fear response during a stressful situation, and stalling the consequent action response takes energy because we must be aware of the self-talk that is happening at that time.

It takes energy for us to tune into the self-talk and to agree or to contradict it. Choosing an optimistic attitude—that the situation is temporary, containable and that something can be done about it means that the physical stress response is lessened and the impact on the body is reduced.

So while exercise, good diet and healthy sleep patterns are effective in helping to assist good health, a person’s ability to view stressful situations positively is even more effective in protecting the person. (Seligman M. E., 2008).

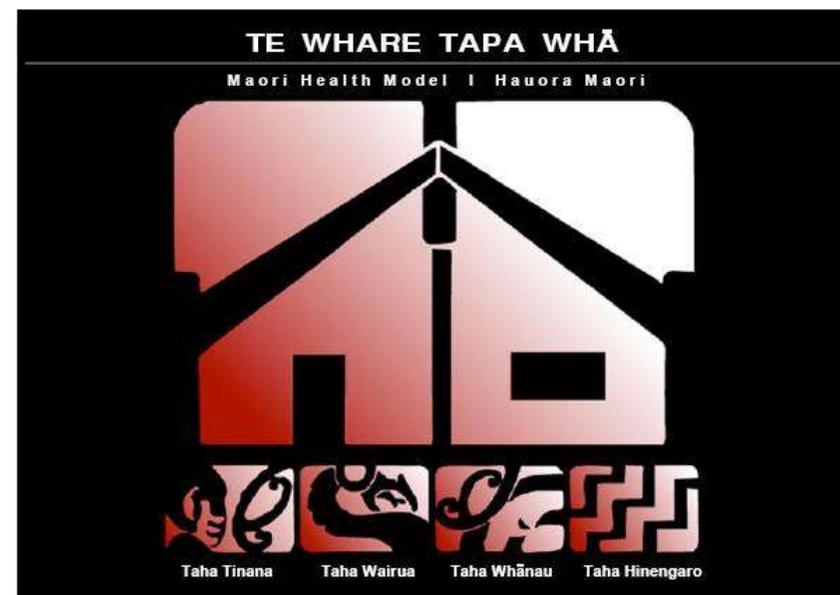
Because the interception of our brain’s stress messages is energy-draining, it is very important to keep your energy levels high in order to remain resilient. There are many ideas and models available to follow for increasing and maintaining fitness and wellness; however models generally suggest that you take care of your physical (sleep, diet, exercise), emotional (positive emotion practice, strengthening social support systems) and mental wellness (seeking challenge and learning).

In New Zealand we are able to use a Māori health model which has four ‘cornerstones’ for health and wellbeing. All four areas need assessment, support and strengthening. The four cornerstones are described in more detail following:

**Māori health models—Te Whare Tapa Whā** (used with permission from Ministry of Health, 2012).

One model for understanding Māori health is the concept of ‘te whare tapa whā’—the four cornerstones (or sides) of Māori health. With its strong foundations and four equal sides, the symbol of the whareniui illustrates the four dimensions of Māori well-being. Should one of the four dimensions be missing or in some way damaged, a person, or a collective may become ‘unbalanced’ and subsequently unwell.

For many Māori, modern health services lack recognition of taha wairua (the spiritual dimension). In a traditional Māori approach, the inclusion of the wairua, the role of the whānau (family) and the balance of the hinengaro (mind) are as important as the physical manifestations of illness.



### **Taha tinana (physical health)** **The capacity for physical growth and development.**



Good physical health is required for optimal development.

Our physical ‘being’ supports our essence and shelters us from the external environment. For Māori, the physical dimension is just one aspect of health and well-being and cannot be separated from the aspect of mind, spirit and family.



### **Taha wairua (spiritual health)** **The capacity for faith and wider communication.**

Health is related to unseen and unspoken energies.

The spiritual essence of a person is their life force. This determines us as individuals and as a collective, who and what we are, where we have come from and where we are going.

A traditional Māori analysis of physical manifestations of illness will focus on the wairua or spirit, to determine whether damage here could be a contributing factor.



### **Taha whānau (family health)** **The capacity to belong, to care and to share where individuals are part of wider social systems.**

Whānau provides us with the strength to be who we are. This is the link to our ancestors, our ties with the past, the present and the future.

Understanding the importance of whānau and how whānau (family) can contribute to illness and assist in curing illness is fundamental to understanding Māori health issues.



### **Taha hinengaro (mental health)** **The capacity to communicate, to think and to feel mind and body are inseparable.**

Thoughts, feelings and emotions are integral components of the body and soul.

This is about how we see ourselves in this universe, our interaction with that which is uniquely Māori and the perception that others have of us.

## A model for developing resilience

This model for developing resilience is adapted from Padesky & Mooney, 2012. Like any change to behaviour, you need to be disciplined to practice the skill so if you feel that you need to develop resilience, you may need to work with a coach who will assist you to reflect on your progress and to challenge you to make any changes.

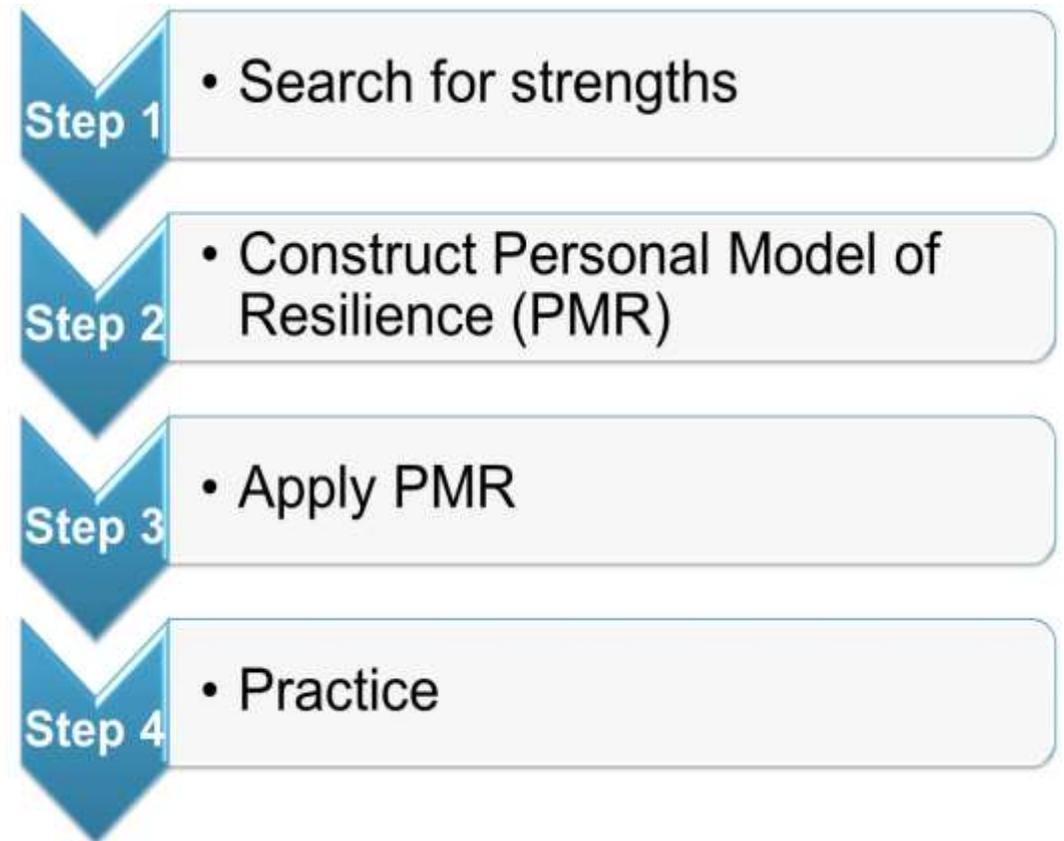
The model follows these steps:

### 1. Search for strengths

- Think of some activities that you are good at and you really enjoy.
- Identify the strengths that you display in those situations.

### 2. Construct a Personal Model of Resilience (PMR)

- Examine your strengths to find some general strengths e.g. 'I am really good at coaching our indoor basketball team' translates into wider strengths of 'I am good at motivating people and setting and communicating goals'.
- Try to think of some images or metaphors to sum up your strengths.
- Write these strengths and metaphors down to remind you of the resilience you **already** show.



### 3. Apply the PMR to areas of life difficulty

- Identify problem areas in need of resilience.
- Plan which of your current PMR strategies to use.
- Focus on resilience, not outcome (e.g. not eliminating the stressful situation, but exercising the planned resilience responses).

### 4. Practice resilience

- Plan more resilience practice opportunities to build confidence.
- Predict your own ability to show resilience in the practice situations.
- Following the practice situation, reflect on the learning.



While increasing your resilience may take some effort on your part—changing behaviours and attitudes toward stressful situations, it will be worth the time and energy that you invest. Exercising resilience is good for your health, your relationships and will help you to lead others through stressful situations.

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