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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT COACHING

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Redefining Resilience: It's not about 'toughing it out'

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How do you define resilience? Is it a concept you embrace and feel uplifted by, or does it induce pressure and stress? If you're tired of hearing about our need to be strong and resilient through tough times in work and life, you're not alone.

Resilience has become an all-too-popular topic in pandemic times, and the misconceptions about it have turned many people off of the concept.

This crystalized for me when someone asked a surprising question at a recent employee wellbeing seminar I led on the importance of rest and self-care for high performance. This person shared that they were required to show up 'resilient' through high-pressure work demands, which to them meant pushing through and toughing out stress, rather than giving themselves a break.

It took me aback to hear someone describe resilience in this way. To me, pushing through hardship is the opposite of what it means to be resilient.

That got me curious, and I started asking my clients and peers what the concept meant to them to try to get a better understanding of people's perspectives on resilience.

One person told me that their company stopped using the term resilience altogether, because feedback suggested their employees negatively viewed it as a pressure to push forward and be productive in the face of stress and untenable circumstances.

One client who I've coached through much adversity over the years, giving me a personal view of their resilience, said that they would never refer to themselves as resilient; the hustle culture in their workplace aligns resilience with grit and grind, and they've come to understand the cost of that approach to their wellbeing.

Someone else who worked with children for much of their career said that they stopped using the word resilient years ago, because of how dismissive it felt to the hardship kids face, exemplified with everyday sentiments like "Sam's parents are getting divorced, but thankfully kids are resilient." That one hit me hard, because I recognized that even I've made those kinds of unintentionally dismissive statements before - it's become so commonplace.

The feedback I collected was an eye-opener for me. As someone who works in the personal development realm, embracing my own capacity for resilience has been a big piece of my own personal growth.



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That's not because I'm great at toughing out and pushing through challenges and adversity. On the contrary, I've learned to be more honest with myself and others about my hardships, stressors and struggles. I've learned to let myself feel and validate the emotions that come along with tough experiences, lean on resources and seek support, and believe that things will shift, in good time. All of this keeps me hopeful, open-minded and focused on the lessons available to me through each experience.

I have learned to meet challenges with a **bounce through and forward** approach, and *that's* the definition of resilience I'm offering up to you.

Resilient People Lean on Resources

I take part in a virtual meditation and movement group that gathers daily not just to be led in mindfulness practices that are good for our minds and bodies, but also to support one another. As a group we've seen each other through divorces, addictions, lay-offs, losses, illness and other life challenges. When one of our group members was diagnosed with lung cancer, she continued to show up each day, vulnerably sharing her struggle with us while continuing to participate as a way of taking care of herself. When she logged in from her hospital bed just days after having lung surgery, I was so moved. "This is resilience in action," I thought.

It was clear that she wasn't there to push herself through our practice, but to do what she could in the modified way she was able to do it given her circumstances.

Seeing this forced me to reflect on my old conditioning, which in the past had me believe I was a victim of my circumstances. With a victim mindset, I would have been prone to spiraling in the darkness of that kind of challenge. But here was a person in the midst of a very serious health hardship. She was not pretending it wasn't hard, but leaning into a resource that was available to help keep her connected, supported, and in command of her wellbeing. She was actively reaching for a resource of light in her time of darkness.

In challenging times, it can take extra effort to seek out and make time for resources that help us strategize the best way forward for our bodies, minds and spirit. But a big piece of resilience is actively making that effort to embrace outside support.

Bouncing Back Is Not an Option

Unless you have a time machine, there is no going back or 'bouncing back' from adversity, change and challenge. Challenging circumstances come up in each of our lives, and yet so many of us are hard on ourselves when we don't 'bounce back quickly' or get back to a former state of being.

When a client who had just gone back to work after maternity leave expressed her disappointment with not being able to 'get back to my old self,' it fired me up to dispel this myth of returning to a former state as being a sign of resiliency. Becoming a parent is a life-changing event, and an intense one at that.



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Striving to get back to the way things were before such a monumental life shift is a sure-fire way to set yourself up for failure and additional distress.

Every experience in our lives shapes us and offers lessons we take forward, whether we're aware of them or not. We take our war wounds, triumphs, failures and setbacks with us. They become part of our story and our personal picture of resilience.

There is no going back. There is only through, and forward.

It's a necessity to allow ourselves to feel all of our genuine emotions through challenging times and normalize the discomfort in those experiences.

When we approach those life-changing events with self-awareness and a growth mindset we not only learn from them, we give ourselves permission to evolve because of them. We enhance our experience of growing through life's events, instead of hindering ourselves trying to get somewhere else.

Who's to say that before was better, anyhow?

Without the pressure to get back to how it used to be, we can be honest with ourselves and others about what's different and challenging in the new place we've journeyed to because of what we've experienced, and we can **adapt** to our new surroundings with more ease and acceptance.

When tragic and traumatic events happen, it can be very upsetting when others encourage us to find the gift and the opportunity in the challenging circumstances. But there is undeniably always something to be learned: about ourselves, others, and life itself.

When we open ourselves to the learning available to us through adversity, we actively focus forward. Considering how we may apply the learning as we move through the challenge and take steps forward in our lives, even if we're not ready or 'there yet', helps us flex our muscle of resilience.

Resilience is a Process, Not a Fixed Trait

I see resilience as a process we engage in, not a skill that we either have or don't have and must activate like a shield the moment things get tough. If we can embrace it as a process, we can remind ourselves in the heat of the moment that we have the capacity to bounce through a challenge by allowing a process to unfold.

That releases us from the pressure to be hardened and push through, and instead be real, and compassionate with ourselves as we move through the process. It also helps us take stock of where we're at in the process, and ask ourselves what our next step might be.

Here's what it roughly looks like for me:



- **Initial Response to Stressor/Difficult Situation:** I allow myself to feel ALL the feelings, and bring self-awareness to my reactions and impulses to respond. Truth be told, I aim to pause before responding, but in the face of stress that's not always possible or accessible. Sometimes this step looks like falling into a messy heap on the floor. I aim not to judge myself for my messy heap moments; even then, I'm a human being, and sometimes we judge ourselves.
- **Acknowledgement of impact:** I let myself get honest about how the event is impacting me, and validate my emotions and fears. A big piece of this is being mindful of my self-talk, allowing myself to notice any negative thoughts that arise but not necessarily believe them. I aim to be discerning here, and challenge my negativity about what's happening without discounting my true feelings.
- **Self-Compassion:** This is a key ingredient in the resilience process. I remind myself that challenges, setbacks, failures and hardships are part of the human experience and happen to everyone. I soothe myself using mindful self-compassion practices, and actively bring kindness to my self-talk, aiming to treat myself as I would a friend going through a similar challenge. I forgive myself for any judgements that may have come up in the messy heap part of the process. I try to remind myself of my strengths and ability to move through stressful situations by looking at past experiences as evidence. I ask myself what I need to help myself through.
- **Inventory of Resources:** I take stock of the resources available to help me through the challenge, and ask myself if there are any new ones I need to seek out to help with the specifics of the adversity. Resources can be people or professionals to talk to or lean on to help me process the challenge, strategize steps forward or help me take necessary action. Or they might be personal resources that help me get the rest and self-care needed to weather the challenging period.
- **Self-Reflection & Looking for Choice Points:** I stay mindfully aware of my emotional state as things unfold, and try to identify the choices available to me to bring some agency to the experience. I may not have chosen the circumstances, but I know I always have choices through them. I aim to make choices that align with my values and authenticity.
- **Lessons to Learn and Potential Opportunities in the Challenge:** I want to stress again that some events are simply traumatic and do not require us to see them as opportunities. But sometimes we *can* pull out the gift and opportunity in a difficult circumstance, and I do open myself to that possibility whenever it's safe to do so. There is always a lesson or something worth taking forward, and I always aim to find it in service of a healthy evolved future.
- **Belief in the Shift:** I remind myself of the impermanence of all experiences in life. This offers a sliver of hope that things will shift, even if they feel really heavy and hard at that moment in time. I try to be patient with myself and others, knowing that a shift will come, and it will take the time it takes. Patience is a key ingredient here.
- **Step by Step:** I take the best next step, when the time is right, and focus forward.



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A process like this has no fixed timeline, and it will look different depending on the situation and person. But a process of resilience can be learned and nurtured, and the more experience we have actively choosing to guide ourselves through the process, the more skilled we become at it.

Resilience may be sold by some as grit and grind. But real resilience is an untidy, dynamic process of bouncing through and forward, in your own time, while taking lessons forward and embracing your evolution. The more you allow yourself to learn from each experience, the greater your capacity to face challenges, find agency through them, and trust the process.

ABOUT JENNY



Jenny Tryansky is an ICF-credentialed Certified Professional Co-Active Coach with a **whole life/whole person approach**.

In her private practice, she works virtually with clients around the world, specializing in working one-on-one with people who are driven yet highly self-critical.

She coaches clients to build meaningful, authentic lives, tackling personal and professional challenges with self-compassion and resilience, as they move forward toward their goals fuelled with confidence instead of self-criticism.

In addition to coaching private clients, Jenny is a writer, speaker, workshop & group leader and mindful self-compassion advocate.

She juggles life in Toronto with her husband and young daughter, and her work with clients around the world.

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For a **complimentary exploration call** with Jenny to determine if there's a great connection and fit, send her an email at jennytryansky@gmail.com or connect through her website.