Building resilience at work

The need for resilience in the workplace has become far more recognised in recent years. In the past, people could realistically expect a job for life in industries that seemed like they’d always stand the test of time.

However, employees now have to be able to deal with the pressures of modern working life. This involves handling increased workloads, changing priorities, organisational change, and even redundancy. In order to be able to thrive, we now have to be resilient.

What is resilience?

Resilience can be defined as being able to ‘bounce back’ from adversity. A more formal definition is ‘the successful adaptation to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions’ (Windle, 1999).

Someone’s level of resilience can depend on both the individual and their environment. For example, an employee’s resilience will be affected by elements of their personality, such as their sense of humour, level of optimism, perspective, and self-belief.

Their resilience will also be dependent on the experience they have within their workplace environment. This may include the amount of social support they receive, their workload, or level of managerial support.
How can we become more resilient at work?

Although some people could be said to have been born with higher levels of resilience than others, it is possible to become more resilient at work by making small changes and learning from our experiences.

Embracing a willingness to learn is known as having a ‘growth mindset’; rather than just accepting things as they are (a fixed mindset), we can be self-aware and do things differently in order to gain a more favourable result next time. Here are some areas where people at work can make changes to build resilience:

1. Communicate

It’s best to inform your manager as soon as possible if you believe you’re feeling the effects of stress. This in itself may seem daunting – many people feel uncomfortable talking to their manager about mental health-related issues out of fear of being judged or treated unfavourably.

However, they may find that in most cases they’d be pleasantly surprised. The most likely response is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding. After all, your manager wants you to be able to do your job, so should help you with any problems. Performance appraisals are an opportunity when any concerns can be addressed. Knowing support is there helps us become more resilient.

2. Build trust

Strong social networks and open communication will help employees feel more resilient at work. Sometimes it’s the small things that count, such as learning people’s names and simply asking how they are.

Team social events will help build friendships, and managers being open and honest in performance appraisals will build trust. When colleagues (and managers) have that level of trust, it becomes much easier to be honest and to discuss any outstanding issues.

We understand that sometimes people find it hard in social situations, especially when suffering from anxiety or depression. However, in the long term, avoidance can make things worse. In this scenario, it’s advisable to take advice specific to anxiety and its symptoms.
3. Be active

Work is an extension of our everyday lives, so looking after our own personal wellbeing will improve mental health and resilience. This involves both watching what we eat and the amount of exercise we do.

When you feel stressed, your brain releases hormones, including cortisol. This puts your body into survival mode where it prepares to ‘fight or flight’, which is ideal for escaping danger but can start to take its toll if it continues for an extended period of time.

Exercise is something that puts your body under stress, causing it to release cortisol. This might seem contradictory, but if you exercise regularly it will decrease the amount of cortisol released when you feel stressed. Through exercising, your body eventually gets used to mild levels of stress, and learns to be more efficient with the amount of cortisol it releases.

4. Embrace learning

One of the main building blocks of resilience is optimism. Research has shown that learning throughout life leads to greater satisfaction and optimism, and can help boost self-esteem by giving us a sense of purpose.

If your workplace offers courses or qualifications, it may be worth taking advantage of the opportunity to learn new skills. It may not only be a boost to your career prospects, but also your mental health and level of resilience.

Learning often involves interacting with other people too, helping build important social bonds.

5. Create a positive environment

Developing a healthy environment at work will make it a happier place to be. This doesn’t have to take major effort; it can involve anything from maintaining an organised, tidy desk through to taking advantage of your employer’s flexible working policy.

Be sure to always take breaks away from your computer. Short breaks of up to five to ten minutes each hour will prevent aches and pains, and give you a breather from stressful work. In the same vein, also take the holidays you are entitled to.

One sign of a toxic workplace is a culture where holidays are frowned upon. Don’t fall into a routine where this is the norm – using your time off and recharging your batteries will make you feel more resilient in the long term.
What changes could you make in order to be more resilient at work? In the spaces below, write down what you could do regarding each area.

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