PositivePsychology.com

3 RESILIENCE EXERCISES

FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of Resilience tools. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with the Positive Psychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own resilience and the resilience of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

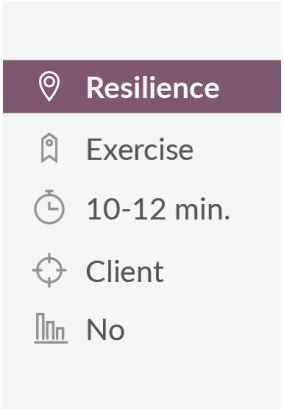
https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/

All the best!

Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.

Using the tools

This product contains 3 different resilience tools. Each tool is structured in the same way, consisting of a background section, a goal description, advice for using the exercise and suggested readings.
On the first page of every tool, a legend is shown, consisting of several icons:



- The first icon displays the main category the tool belongs to.
- The second icon shows the type of tool. The following options are available:

» Exercise (a tool that describes an activity that is done once, during a session)
» Assessment (a tool that aims to assess a trait or characteristic of a person)
» Overview (a tool that provides an overview or list of something; research findings, facts, etc.)
» Advice (a tool that is directed at the helping professional providing advice on how to carry out a certain activity)
» Meditation (a tool that describes a form of meditation)
» Intervention (a tool that describes an activity that needs to be done more than once during a certain period)

- The third icon provides an estimation of the duration of the tool. In other words, how long it takes to complete the exercise. This is always an estimation of the total time it takes. Note that for some tool types, like overview, advice, protocol and intervention it is difficult if not impossible to provide an estimation of the duration. In these cases n/a (not available) is written.
- The fourth icon describes the intended audience for this tool; available options include client, coach or group.
- The last icon indicates whether this specific tool has been tested at least once in a scientific study and has been published in a peer reviewed journal (yes or no). Note that if there is a strong theoretical and scientifically tested basis underlying the tool, but the tool itself in its current form has not been directly addressed in research, the icon will still indicate “no”.

Important note

Please note that the tools in this give-away are not a substitute for a clinical or coaching certification program, which we recommend you take before you call yourself an official “therapist” or “coach” and before you see clients or patients.

Note that you are advised to use these tools within the boundaries of your professional expertise. For instance, if you are a certified clinician, you are advised to use the exercises within your field of expertise (e.g. clinical psychology). Likewise, a school teacher may use the exercises in the classroom, but is not advised to use the exercises for clinical populations. PositivePsychology.com B.V. is not responsible for unauthorized usage of these tools.

Doors Closed Doors Open

Resilience
Exercise
10-12 min.
Client
No

"The only thing that is constant is change" is a famous quote by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Indeed, life is constantly changing and evolving. This means that from time to time, things just stop existing. Losing a job, ending a marriage or moving to another place are examples of changes that many people have experienced. We lose out on something important, a big plan collapses, or we are rejected by someone. Another way of expressing this feeling of loss is that a door is being closed. However, the end of one thing is always the beginning of something new. We have the option to stay focused on what is not here anymore (the doors that have been closed), or become aware of the new avenues that unfold. Optimism is about the latter option. It is about also seeing the doors that are being opened. It is about holding a favourable view about the future, taking closing doors into consideration and turning them into something beneficial.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is twofold. First, the exercise can make clients aware that the end of something is also the beginning of something new. The end of something positive is not only negative, but can also create room for something positive again. The exercise can help clients to become aware that this requires a shift in perspective from focusing on what is not there anymore, to seeing the potential of the future. Second, the exercise can help clients to become aware of what currently prevents them from adopting a more optimistic outlook when doors close. This insight can be used to develop a more positive outlook for future "closing door events".

Advice

Talking about important things that no longer exist can be an emotional exercise for clients. Make sure to acknowledge the pain and the difficulty that they experience(d) because of the loss. If a practitioner moves on too fast to the positive side of a closing door, the client may feel misunderstood. Explain that the goal of the exercise is not to downplay the negative event, but to create awareness of the positive potential that arises as a result from the closed door.

Suggested Readings

Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York: Vintage Books.

Doors Closed Doors Open

Instructions

Think about a time in your life where someone rejected you or you missed out on something important or when a big plan collapsed. These would be points in your life where a door closed. Now think about what happened after: what doors opened after? What would have never happened if the first door didn't close? Write down these experiences in the spaces below (write as many experiences as possible that come to mind).

The door that closed on me was:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

The new door that opened for me was:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Now, reflect upon your experiences and respond to the following questions:

- What led to the door closing? What helped you open the new door?
- How long did it take you to realize that a new door was open?
- Was it easy or hard for you to realize that a new door was open?
- What prevented you from seeing the new open door?
- What can you do next time to recognize the new opportunity sooner?
- What were the effects of the door closing on you? Did it last long?
- Did the experience bring anything positive?
- Which character strengths did you use in this exercise?
- What does a closed door represent to you now?

- What did you learn from the door closing?
- Is there more room for growth from these types of experiences?
- Is there a closed door that you still wish to see open?

Now think of all the people that have helped you open doors in the past. What did they do to help you? And what could you do to help others?

Using Values to Build Resilience

Resilience
Exercise
45 mins
Client
No

"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." - Friedrich Nietzsche

Past research findings suggest that connecting to personal values can help people be more resilient in the face of stress. For example, according to resilient school leaders, the process of "privately clarifying, publicly articulating, and consciously acting on" core values is a great source of strength in helping them face adversity and emerge stronger than before (Patterson and Kelleher, Resilient School Leaders. 2005, p. 51). In line with this claim, affirmations of personal values have been found to attenuate perceptions of threat (Keough, 1998; Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988), reduce rumination after failure (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), and reduce defensive responses to threatening information (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000).

A study by Creswell and colleagues (2005) showed that reflecting on personal values buffered physiological and psychological stress responses during a laboratory stress challenge.

Participants completed either a value-affirmation task or a control task prior to participating in a laboratory stress challenge. Participants who affirmed their values had significantly lower cortisol responses to stress, compared with control participants. These results suggest that reflecting on personal values can keep neuroendocrine and psychological responses to stress at low levels. Interestingly, research findings suggest that even relatively short writing exercises seem to have quite long-lasting and dramatic effects. For example, in a study by Stinson and colleagues (2011), a fifteen-minute values affirmation exercise continued to reduce relationship insecurity for four weeks after the initial exercise. In terms of possible mechanisms, connecting to personal values may be a way for people to motivate themselves to actively deal with challenging life events. Values provide a reason to keep going, especially when life events make it hard or impossible to live in line with personal values. For example, after becoming unemployed, a father with two young kids may be very motivated to bounce back and find a new job, so that his kids will have sufficient resources to grow up as happy adults. Driven by his values "love" and "care", he may find the strength to actively deal with the stressful life event in order to continue living in line with these values. In this tool, values affirmation is used to build resilience during stressful life events.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to motivate clients to actively deal with a challenging event by helping them to get in touch (again) with their personal values. Simply put, this exercise is about managing stress by knowing what you value.

Advice

- Encourage creativity in the step where clients create their values reminder. Here are some options:
  - Use pen and paper to make drawings.
  - Use photographs.
  - Use scissors to cut pictures and texts from hardcopy magazines and glue them together on a piece of paper.
  - Use apps, like Bloom (http://appcrawlr.com/ios/bloom-2) or Corkulous Pro (http://appcrawlr.com/ios/corkulous-pro).
  - Use Powerpoint or Keynote to build a presentation with images, photos, text and so on.
  - Anything else that the client might feel is a creative expression of important values in the vision board.
- It is important to advise your client that the purpose of their values reminder is not to focus on specific outcomes that one hopes to achieve. Instead, the current reminder should represent general values that are considered to be important in life. Unlike goals, which represent what we want to achieve, values are ways of living that can never be obtained like an object, and can only be realized from moment to moment. In sum, the focus is on what is important to your client, rather than on what he/she aims to achieve.
- After your client has created the values reminder, ask him/her if he/she would like to discuss it together. Allowing the client to share the values reminder with the practitioner can not only enhance the connection between both but can also create a fruitful starting point for behavioral change. Questions that can be discussed during the evaluation are:
  - Can you explain to me what we are looking at?
  - How was it to create this values reminder?
  - What did you experience while making it?
  - What did you learn from this exercise?
- Often during stressful times, the client's focus is mostly on dealing with negative things. This exercise helps clients to shift from a focus on what is wrong, to a focus on what makes life worth living.

Resources

- Creswell, J. D., Welch, W. T., Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Gruenewald, T. L., & Mann, T. (2005). Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. *Psychological Science*, *16*(11), 846-851.
- Stinson, D. A., Logel, C., Shepherd, S., & Zanna, M. P. (2011). Rewriting the self-fulfilling prophecy of social rejection: Self-affirmation improves relational security and social behavior up to 2 months later. *Psychological science*, *22*, 1145-1149.
- Patterson, J. L., & Kelleher, P. (2005). *Resilient School Leaders: Strategies for Turning Adversity into Achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Keough, K.A. (1998). When the self is at stake: Integrating the self into stress and physical health research (Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1998). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *58*, 3959.
- Koole, S.L., Smeets, K., van Knippenberg, A., & Dijksterhuis, A. (1999). The cessation of rumination through self-affirmation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 111–125.
- Sherman, D.K., & Cohen, G. (2002). Accepting threatening information: Self-affirmation and the reduction of defensive biases. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 11, 119–123.
- Steele, C.M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology: Vol. 21. Social psychological studies of the self: Perspectives and programs (pp. 261–302). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Sherman, D.K., Nelson, L.D., & Steele, C.M. (2000). Do messages about health risks threaten the self? Increasing the acceptance of threatening health messages via self-affirmation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26,* 1046–1058.

Using Values to Build Resilience

The goal of this exercise is to help you manage a challenging life event by connecting to what is important to you. That is, connecting to your values.

Step #1 Describe the challenging life event

Take a moment to consider a challenging event that is currently taking place. For example, you may have recently lost your job. Briefly describe the stressful event below:

Step #2 Identify reasons to get through the challenge

Consider why it is worth it to you to persevere and get through this challenging life situation. For example, getting through the challenge of losing a job and finding a new one may be worth it to you because you want to be there for your family, you want to be a role model for your son, and you want to contribute to the world. Come up with as many reasons as you can, and list them in the space below.

Step #3 Identify values

Your *values* are the things that you consider to be important in life, such as honesty, kindness, care, autonomy, helping others, and financial independence. With consideration to the reasons you listed in step 2, think of values that capture the essence of each of these reasons. For example, if you listed that you want to be there for your family, the value could be "caring". Note, finding the perfect value for each reason is not so important; what matters is if the value makes sense to you personally. It should also be noted that there may be more than one value per reason. A list of common values is displayed on p. 14.

The values that make persevering through the challenge worth it to me:

Step #4 Staying in touch with values

When stressful life events occur, it can be difficult to stay connected to our values. The stress that results from stressful events can absorb so much of our attention that we lose track of what is truly important to us. And yet, values can serve as a light in the darkness of stressful times, reminding us why is it worth fighting for something, to keep going and to take responsibility.

This step involves creating a visual reminder of the values you specified in step 3. Using a blank piece of paper (either an individual sheet of paper or a page in a journal), represent your values visually in a way that you chose. You might like to use illustrations, photographs, or words (or a combination of these). You may also consider creating a digital representation of your values, for example by using PowerPoint. Allow yourself to be as creative as you like here, ensuring that however you choose to represent your values resonates with you personally.

After you have completed your visual values reminder, you can put it somewhere where you can see it every day (e.g., on the refrigerator or office desk). In this way, it can help you to stay in touch with what makes your struggle worth going through.

List of Values

Acceptance
Achievement
Advancement & Promotion
Adventure
Affection
Altruism
Arts
Awareness
Beauty
Challenge
Change
Community
Compassion
Competence
Competition
Completion
Connectedness
Cooperation
Collaboration
Country
Creativity
Decisiveness
Democracy
Design
Discovery
Diversity
Environmental Awareness
Economic Security
Education
Effectiveness
Efficiency
Elegance
Entertainment
Enlightenment
Equality
Ethics
Excellence
Excitement
Experiment
Expertise
Exhilaration
Fairness
Fame
Family
Happiness
Fast Pace
Freedom
Friendship
Fun
Grace
Growth
Harmony
Health
Helping Others
Helping Society
Honesty
Humor
Imagination
Improvement
Independence
Influencing Others
Inner Harmony
Inspiration
Integrity
Intellect
Involvement
Knowledge
Leadership
Learning
Loyalty
Magnificence
Making a Difference
Mastery
Meaningful Work
Ministering
Money
Morality
Mystery
Nature
Openness
Originality
Order
Passion
Peace
Personal Development
Personal Expression
Planning
Play
Pleasure
Power
Privacy
Purity
Quality
Radiance
Recognition
Relationships
Religion
Reputation
Responsibility
Risk Safety & Security
Self-Respect
Sensibility
Sensuality
Serenity
Service
Sexuality
Sophistication
Spark
Speculation
Spirituality
Stability
Status
Success
Teaching
Tenderness
Thrill
Unity
Variety
Wealth
Winning
Wisdom

The Resilience Plan (The Four S's)

Resilience
Exercise
20 min
Client or group
No

How do people overcome challenging life events and experiences, like the death of a loved one, losing a job, or being diagnosed with a serious illness? Most people react to such circumstances with a surge of negative affect and a sense of uneasiness; yet over time, they somehow adjust and adapt. People are able to "bounce back" from adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress, because of their inherent *resilience*: "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging circumstances," (Garmezy and Masten, 1991, p. 459). According to Abiola and Udofia (2011), resilience is associated with inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility, and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity; and, minimizing the impact of risk factors, such as stressful life events, and enhancing the protective factors, such as optimism, social support, and active coping, that increase people's ability to deal with life's challenges.

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone (McDonald et al., 2012). One way to develop resilience is to draw on one's learning from similar challenges in the past, to remember what he or she already knows, but may have forgotten. What was it exactly that enabled a person to get through a period of illness, or a divorce, or being laid off at work? That is, which supports did they call on, what strategies did they use, what sagacity did they hold onto, and what solutions did they find. These resilience resources are also known as the 4 S's.

This tool helps people unpack their personal resources for resilience by giving them a framework (The 4 S's) to bring out what specifically works for them.

Author

This tool was created by Dr Lucinda Poole and Dr Hugo Alberts.

Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients devise a personal resilience plan based on their existing resources (that is, what has helped them bounce back from difficulties in the past).

Advice

- The beauty of this tool is that clients trust their resilience plan, given many if not all of the resources have worked for them in the past. No matter how ridiculous it may seem to another person to listen to a particular pop song over and over again, or to buy a bar of particularly expensive chocolate, or to re-read a children's book, the client knows it helps them. In this way, these resilience plans are highly individualized and thus personally meaningful and useful.
- Before trying this exercise with clients, test it on yourself by thinking of an occasion when your resilience was tested, and the different ways (using the 4 S's) that you overcame it.
- In Part B, practitioners can draw on their own expertise to guide clients to come up with ideas for each of the 4 S's.

Resources

- Abiola, T., & Udofia, O. (2011). Psychometric assessment of the Wagnild and Young's resilience scale in Kano, Nigeria. *BMC Research Notes*, 4, 509.
- McDonald, G., Jackson, D., Wilkes, L., & Vickers, M. H. (2012). A work-based educational intervention to support the development of personal resilience in nurses and midwives. *Nurse Education Today, 32*, 378-384.
- Garmezy, N., & Masten, A. S. (1991). The protective role of competence indicators in children at risk. In E. M. Cummings, A. L. Greene, & K. H. Karraker (Eds.), *Life-span developmental psychology: Perspectives on stress and coping* (pp. 151-174). Hillsdale, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

The Resilience Plan (The Four S's)

Resilience is the ability to cope with whatever life throws at you, and bounce back stronger and more steadfast than before. Resilient people work through life challenges using personal resources, including social support, coping strategies, sagacity (which is the wisdom and insight that we hold onto), and solution-seeking. This exercise helps you draw on your resilience resources to build a personal resilience plan, which you can use to help you combat any future challenges.

Part 1: My Past Sources of Resilience

Step 1. Recall a recent example of resilience

Think about a time recently when you overcome a challenge or set back in your life. Perhaps you injured yourself, or received some negative feedback at work, or had an argument with a friend or family member. Briefly describe this difficulty below.

Step 2. Identify supportive people

What 'supportive people' in your life kept you standing when it would have been easier to fall down? For instance, did you call an old friend, or ask a teacher for advice, or perhaps a parent or grandparent gave you a pep talk. Write down who you called on for support in the top right cell of the table in Appendix A.

Step 3. Identify strategies

What 'strategies' did you use to help yourself cope with any negative thoughts and feelings that showed up in response to the difficulty? For example, did you meditate, or write in a gratitude journal, or go for a walk, or listen to a particular song or type of music, or have a massage to release tension. Write down the strategies you used in the bottom left cell of the table in Appendix A.

Step 4. Identify sagacity

What 'sagacity' helped you bounce back from this difficulty? Sagacity is the wisdom and insight that you hold onto. It can come from song lyrics, novels, poetry, spiritual writings, quotes from the famous, the sayings of one's grandparent, or learning from one's own experience. Write down your sagacity in the bottom right cell of the table in Appendix A.

Step 5. Identify solution-seeking behaviors

What solution-seeking behaviors did you display to help you actively deal with the problem? For example, did you problem-solve, or seek out new information, or plan ahead, or negotiate, or speak up and voice your opinion, or ask others for help. Write down the solution-seeking behaviors you displayed in the top left cell of the table in Appendix A.

Part 2: My Resilience Plan

Step 6. Describe a current difficulty

In the space below, describe a current difficulty or challenge that you are facing.

Step 7. Apply the resilience plan to the current difficulty

Given the social supports, strategies, sagacity, and solution-seeking behaviors that helped you last time, let us look at how you could use the same or similar resources to help you bounce back from this current difficulty you are facing (identified in the previous step). Read through your completed plan (Appendix A) and write down the skills, supports, strategies, and sagacity that could work again for you in the blank resilience plan template in Appendix B. Allow some flexibility here in the sense that the same type of social support/ strategy/ sagacity/ solution-seeking behavior could be tweaked according to your current situation, for instance going to your manager rather than a parent for support in the face of a work-related problem. An example of a completed resilience plan is shown in Appendix C.

Step 8. Carry out your resilience plan

The next step is to put your resilience plan into action. To do this, consider the order in which to use your different supports, strategies, sagacity, and solution-seeking behaviors: which resource is most feasible to start with? Often the most feasible resource is the smallest step that you can take, such as calling your partner. On your resilience plan (Appendix B), place the number 1 next to the first resource you will use. Then, continue to number your different resources in the order in which you would feasibly use them.

Then, go ahead an action your first resource, and continue to work through your resilience plan (in order) until you have overcome this difficulty.

Once you have come through the other side, please move on to the next step.

Part 3: Evaluation

Step 9. Evaluate your resilience plan

Discuss the following:

- How was it for you to carry out your resilience plan? Did it help you bounce back from this difficulty?
- What resources (specific skills/supports/strategies/sagacity) were most helpful to you? Why?
- What resources (specific skills/supports/strategies/sagacity) were least helpful to you? Why?
- Did you not use any resources, and if so, why?
- Is there anything you would like to add to your resilience plan?
- In what other areas of your life could you use your resilience plan? How might things improve for you?

Appendix A: My Past Sources of Resilience

Supports that kept you upright	**Strategies** that kept you moving
Sagacity that gave you comfort and hope	**Solution-seeking** behaviors you showed

Appendix B: My Resilience Plan

Supports that keep you upright	**Strategies** that keep you moving
Sagacity that gives you comfort and hope	**Solution-seeking** behaviors you can show

Appendix C: Example of a completed Resilience Plan

Difficult situation: Stuffed up a job interview and did not get the job

Supports that keep you upright	**Strategies** that keep you moving
Called my partner Joe - 0432182074 *Called my Mum - 0409867222* *Booked an apt with my therapist*	*Went for a walk* *Smiling Mind meditation app* *Calming breathing technique* *Played with my dog* *Did some gardening* *Wrote in my gratitude journal* *Expressive writing*
Sagacity that gives you comfort and hope	**Solution-seeking** behaviors you can show
Remembered that growth comes from mistakes *"This too shall pass" - sticky note on the fridge* *Thought about what I could do differently next time and wrote down on paper*	*Asked for feedback from job interviewers* *Applied for 3x new jobs* *Sought professional coaching for job interviewing*