

# ADAPTATION & RESILIENCE

*by Alison Verge*

*“Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”*

*-Nelson Mandela*

## **Oh, So Naive!**

I must not cry.... I need to be strong. I can't let other people see how weak I am. If I ignore the problem, it will all just go away, right? I'll just do everything the way it's always been done then life will be safe and nothing horrible will happen.

These are all subconscious thoughts I had during tough times and you may have as well. I thought it was admirable to never show signs of weakness. It took many years and some very rough situations for me to finally realize that resilience is not about smiling, pretending everything is OK and acting fearless. This is the great fallacy about what it means to be resilient. In fact, this misperception leads to the opposite, driving people towards unhealthy choices in their lives strictly out of fear. The fear of facing adversity and change.

The greatest transformation happened in my life when I embraced the changes that were occurring and discovered how to deal with hurdles along the way.

## **Seriously Universe? WTF?**

Things were great! My kids and business were thriving, my husband still loved me, I was in the best shape of my life and I was finally getting some time to really focus on my own needs and wants! Of course, I had problems like many of you and if you asked me prior to that time, I probably would have said that my life was difficult at times. But I had no idea till much later how much tougher things would become and how hard I would have to fight to feel joy again.

Five years ago, a skiing accident resulted in a condition called Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) also nicknamed “the suicide disease” or “the invisible illness” as the symptoms are not always visibly obvious. It often goes undiagnosed and the pain level is higher than childbirth or amputation without drugs (McGill pain index scale). There did not appear to be a lot of hope beyond prescription opiates that I did not want to take. Being a former exercise fanatic now wheelchair bound outside the home, this was pure torture – both physically and emotionally!

Unfortunately, around the same time, just after planning a large renovation to our home, my marriage of 20 years ended. It felt like the universe had it in for me. After a lot of pondering, I knew I had two choices: to fight back or throw in the towel and give in to the pain and sorrow. I could very easily just take the drugs to dull my senses. But with two daughters, a successful career, and a healthy body I had worked my whole life for, I was not prepared to accept this fate. My future was going to be bright, one way or another.

I researched and tried countless therapies. My limits were tested. There were times the pain was so horrible it made me sick to my stomach, but I kept the finish line in site. Little did I know that through this journey, not only would I go into remission which is very rare, but I would also come out stronger than I ever thought possible. I had a new level of resilience that I am sure will benefit me for years to come.

### **What Exactly is Resilience?**

The dictionary defines resilience as *tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change*. Does this mean that people who are resilient don't experience suffering? Absolutely not. In fact, becoming resilient requires emotional distress in order to learn the best practices for dealing with them and learning to buffer the adverse effects. Resilience is not a character trait you are

born with. Anyone can learn to develop the necessary thoughts, behaviors, and actions to build it up. Each person's level of resilience varies.

Take for example two patients suffering a lot of pain from the same injury being asked to rate it on a scale of 1-10. Patient #1 may rate it a 10/10 as the worst pain imaginable. Patient #2 may rate it a 5/10 being tolerable to them.

Everyone copes differently with life's struggles, what affects one person may have little impact on another. Similarly, people can demonstrate high resilience in one area of their lives, in their workplace, but be less resilient in another, in their personal life. A doctor may be able to calmly deal with his or her patients but explode with anger when faced with conflict at home.

### **How Does One Become Resilient?**

There is no quick fix. Many strategies are easy on their own, but resilience comes with practice over time and has been shown to be more prevalent in individuals who use a variety of coping strategies. I know I would not be sitting here right now with a smile on my face, having just completed a good workout without adopting these key practices:

***Health and Wellness*** - An unhealthy mind and/or body will make any struggle twice as hard. Think of it like a soldier putting on his armor preparing for war. Being healthy is the best armor we have to fight life's battles.

***Exercise*** – There are many excuses why we can't find the time to exercise but if there is a will, there really is a way. With your doctor's approval, try and exercise at least 3 times per week. There are plenty of quick YouTube workout routines you can find to do at home or incorporate into your daily ritual. Get creative and climb your office or condo stairs, do water aerobics, a Wii dance video etc. I find the best time to work out is the morning, so nothing interferes. It also provides an energy boost, which is an extra bonus if going through a rough time.

**Sleep** – Try to get at least 7 hours a night. Every problem seems so much worse without adequate rest. Write down any to-dos for the next day so they do not weigh on your mind. Keep a notepad handy by your bed in case you wake up with a pressing thought preventing you from going back to sleep. Write it down and let it go!

**Eat well** – Our system goes out of alignment causing our moods to go downhill when we make bad choices like: skipping meals - especially breakfast which leads to low blood sugar, likely making you feel sluggish and tired. Also cutting out entire food groups will make it difficult to get all the essential nutrients you need leading to mood swings and decreased energy. Some of my favorite foods that I eat every day to boost moods are dark chocolate, berries, raw nuts and avocado. Eating too many unhealthy carbohydrates that are processed, such as white bread and pastries, trigger a fast rise and fall in blood sugars. This can lead to low energy and irritability.

Of course, it is ok to treat yourself, but limit these to once or twice per week or choose better options like dark chocolate. Ensure the easy to grab snack options are healthy options. Eat home cooked meals as much as possible. No time? There are so many available quick and healthy recipes that can be prepared in as little as 15 minutes or less.

**Therapy** – Sometimes we need extra support beyond what we can do for ourselves. Know the signs. If it ever starts to become too much, seek out help. This does not make you weak, it takes courage to ask for help and it is always a good idea to talk things out even if the situation is not in crisis. Therapy comes in all forms these days - coaching, psychotherapy, psychiatry, social work etc. In my opinion, trust and comfort between the client and therapist is most important. Regardless of the type you choose, dealing with pent up emotions is essential to building up resilience.

**Journal** – Keeping everything bottled up inside takes its toll, even the small things add up. Writing down your thoughts, feelings, and ideas each day, can release a

lot of pent up frustration and can be very enlightening. *Side tip* - make a BITCH journal! I met a wise woman who kept 2 journals. One for her everyday thoughts and the other purely to rant and get anything she wanted to release off her chest. I thought this was a brilliant tip! Just make sure it is kept well hidden. LOL

***Family & Friends*** - You can tell yourself you don't need anyone but learning to handle life's bumpy roads requires some hand holding and shoulders to lean on along the way. Human beings need social interaction to thrive. A simple reminder from a friend that they have been thinking about you can do amazing things to lift your spirits. Just don't forget how important face to face communication is. Get out there! Join a special interest group through *Meetup*, take a fitness class, chat with the person next to you in line for coffee etc. There are lots of ways to connect with people.

***Evaluate your relationships*** – Decide if the people in your life are worth taking up your valuable time. Does interacting with this person tend to lift your spirits or drag you down? Do you feel good about yourself when you are around them? Do they have a positive outlook? If you offer support and express an interest in their life, do they reciprocate? You don't have to cut ties completely with those who have a negative influence but take them out of your close circle. To build up resilience, the best thing you can do is surround yourself with a positive, supportive social community. Who knows, you may even have a little fun along the way!

***Forgive past grievances*** – Whether with family, friends or colleagues, make a conscious choice to deal with any issues and not just sweep them under the carpet. These hidden resentments build up and drain your available reserve of resilience to deal with future issues that may arise. Ask yourself what purpose holding onto this grudge has, if any? It's only hurting you in the end. Forgiveness is a very hard thing to swallow but the benefits are huge.

***Personal Development*** – Keep working to train your brain into believing it can and will overcome anything.

**Build Confidence** - Build confidence in who you are and what you can do! My experience has proved my mind is my most powerful force. Our actions are completely influenced by our beliefs and if you don't believe you can, you simply won't. Be confident that with the right strategies you WILL get through this – even STRONGER than before!

**Change Your Mindset** - Change your mindset. See the glass as half full instead of half empty. When struggling, step back. Try to see it from an alternate, positive standpoint? What is the purpose behind this? Perhaps there is something to be learned? If still cloudy, make a list of pros and cons. If you are ambitious, go one step further and brainstorm potential solutions. This process trains your brain to start processing obstacles less harshly, as part of life's path of discovery. Another advantage is positive people attract positive people – law of attraction. Who wants to be around a Negative Nelly? And this positive interaction is a key ingredient to building up your resilience. Start by wearing a smile when you can. It's contagious.

**Gratitude and Giving Back** - Make gratitude a part of your daily routine. When you start to appreciate what you have, even the little things can make your life seem a lot better. This can be integrated into your journaling. Write down at least 3 things you are grateful for each day. Writing it down helps it stick in our minds and remember what we are grateful for. NO ONE IS JUDGING! Go beyond the obvious family, health, and home responses. It can be as small as getting the concert tickets you wanted. Only you are ever going to read it.

**Help others** – Donate to charity, buy a coffee for the person behind you in line, help an elderly person carry something, or plan a surprise meal for your spouse. Helping and giving to others has the dual effect of making both the receiving party and us feel special. This in turn lowers our stress levels, building up our resilience a little further with the belief that we are deserving of good things happening in the future.

**Physical Environment** – This can be described as anything that our senses can physically experience like touch, smell, sight, hearing, and/or taste. Create a space and spend time in places that make you feel happy and at peace. Perhaps a walk, sitting in the garden, reading by a fire or candlelight etc.

De-clutter or make some changes to ensure your home is a welcoming place. You spend most of your time there so it should be a safe, comforting space.

**Mindful Stress Test** -Walk into your home, immediately notice your body. Did any parts of it tense up as you walked in? What about your breath and heart rate? Did either elevate? If so, perhaps it's time to examine what's at the core of that stress within the home itself.

**Spirituality** - Meditation comes in many forms and is easily available anywhere, anytime, at any cost. Try just sitting still and paying attention to your thoughts. Your subconscious mind can tell you so much. Really tuning into what your body is telling you can release a great deal of stress.

Mindfulness can be practiced with or without meditation. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, mindfulness is *the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.*

Research has linked mindfulness practice with less stress and anxiety, more focus, better sleep, managed chronic pain, less depression and more.

Similar to the test above, try simply pausing when you feel strong emotions to notice how it feels in your body – like tightness in your jaw and shoulders when you feel stress, warmth in your chest when you feel love, and butterflies in your stomach when you feel nervous.

**Fun & Recreation** – It's so much easier to overcome life's struggles when we take time out for some fun! It's important to train our brains to notice the good times.

***Celebrate the mini successes in each day!*** - Was today a little less painful than yesterday? Did you accomplish something you never thought you could? Celebrate with something you love like dinner at your favorite restaurant, seeing a play, etc.

***Unplug*** - Unplug by going out and having some fun. Take some risks! It takes practice to move out of your comfort zone, but you will be glad you did. I am not saying you should bet your house at the casino or climb Mt. Everest, but if you always wanted to bungee jump, take salsa lessons, or swim with a dolphin – go for it! Life is precious and it's meant to be fully lived with whatever time we have. Look at some of the most successful people. They did not get there without taking risks and making significant changes. Speaking of changes...

### **You MUST Accept CHANGE to Build Resilience.**

I am a true testament that change and difficult times build resilience. Looking out my condo window at the gorgeous cityscape, I am astonished at how my life has transformed over the last 5 years. I never could have imagined that I could be happy in this situation. From a 20-year marriage, raising 2 girls with a good life on all accounts, to overcoming a debilitating condition, a marriage breakup, a house disaster, and a total career change. It's hard to be grateful for some of these changes but I am happy they happened as I feel I am in the best stage of my life and I no longer fear the unknown. It's exciting to not always be able to predict what's coming.

Changes come in all forms. Some are positive like a promotion, and some difficult like disease. During the hardest times, allowing myself to go through the following stages in order to heal and accept the new changes in my life was integral to building my resilience.

***Grief*** - Accept the sadness and cry it out, watch a tearjerker movie if you have to.  
***Anger*** - Why did this happen to me? Release in any way that works for you (i.e. exercise, hitting a pillow, writing etc.) if it's not hurting anyone else.



**Forgiveness** – Resentment will only drag you down further.

**Acceptance** – the changes that have occurred in your life and those that still need to happen.

**Determination** – to overcome these obstacles and make this the best life it can be!

**Key Takeaways:**

- Success does not happen without change.
- We need to fail in order to learn, so go ahead and try.
- Life would be very boring if nothing ever changed.
- The changes we dread often lead to some of the greatest things in life.
- Don't resist those that are presented to you as something miraculous may occur.... even better – seek them out!

Through Adversity Comes Transformation – Welcome to a Wonderful New Life!

Although the past 5 years were the most challenging of my life, I would not change them. So transformational, it's mind-blowing! My entire life has evolved in ways I never dreamed of. One would almost think that destiny played a part and that my life at that time needed a little shaking up. Regardless, I stand here today, proud of who I have become. Someone I believe my girls can look up to, and someone, through the power of resilience and adaptation to change, is not afraid to face the world head on.

“Every mountain top is in reach if you just keep climbing.”

- Barry Finlay

### ***About Alison Verge***

It took a major health crisis and a 20-year marriage break-up for Alison Verge to truly discover resilience, the importance of change and eventually her true calling of becoming a Relationship and Dating Coach. Leaving her former 25-year Client Relationship/Account Management career behind, determined to make every moment count and her daughters proud, Alison aims to make a difference in this world by helping others find, keep and cherish lasting love through her Path2Love Coaching practice. You can find out more about Alison here:

[www.path2love.com](http://www.path2love.com)