

Unlocking the Secret to Mental Resilience

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Mental resilience helps people cope with life's challenges. Researchers are studying resilient individuals to understand the mechanisms behind their ability to stay mentally healthy despite stress
- › The stress hormone cortisol negatively impacts cognitive function, muscle mass and overall health when chronically elevated. Managing stress and cortisol levels is crucial for maintaining good health and mental resilience
- › Optimism is a key factor in resilience. Studies show that cultivating a positive outlook leads to better stress management, improved health outcomes and longer lifespan
- › Developing resilience is a gradual process. Strategies to build resilience include increasing healthy carbohydrate intake, practicing positive thinking, regular walking and improving sleep quality
- › Physical activity, particularly walking, is highlighted as an effective antiaging strategy. It benefits both physical and mental health, including improved mitochondrial function, which contribute to mental resilience

As humans, we're faced with different challenges throughout our lives. Loss, traumatic events and daily stressors are examples that influence your disposition in life. While some people have trouble coping, others take it all in stride. In other words, they're mentally and emotionally resilient.

What makes a person resilient? With our bodies being assaulted by processed food, pollution and other stressors every day, it seems that cultivating a resilient mindset is more important than ever. To shed more light on this topic, researchers are studying the minds of resilient individuals to help improve the resiliency of others.

Into the Mind of Resilient People

In a documentary titled "Mental Health and Resilience – The Secrets of Inner Strength," Raffael Kalisch, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research, sought to discover what makes people resilient. He was inspired by his own experience during his younger days as a university student, when he was having a great time.

However, a close friend was having trouble coping. This prompted Kalisch to ask himself, "Why does it happen to some people and not to others?"¹

To find the answer, Kalisch is currently conducting a long-term study composed of 200 healthy participants, and the test variable here is that they're currently going through a difficult phase in their lives. Specifically, the participants are young adults in a transitional phase, going from school to adult life.

Kalisch believes this change in their environment causes stress-related illnesses to appear. If preexisting conditions were already there at the time of the study, they become more severe.²

Every three months, participants fill out a questionnaire about their current mental state. According to Kalisch, regular updates are crucial to the study. "We get a very good picture of stress levels over a long period of time," he says. That way, the researchers have a clear picture how the participants react to the challenges they face.³

In addition to questionnaires, participants also routinely visit the research center to undergo magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, which gives Kalisch and his team a look at how the human brain processes mental stress. Blood and hair samples are also taken to see how stress affects the body. Using this multifaceted approach, Kalisch hopes to understand the mechanisms that resilient people use to stay mentally health.

The Cortisol Connection

An important point Kalisch highlights in his research is the effects of stress on the body. As noted earlier, hair samples are collected, which is done for the purpose of analyzing the concentration of cortisol.⁴ Now, you may be wondering, what is the connection between hair and cortisol concentration?

According to Precision Analytical Inc., creators of the DUTCH (Dried Urine Test for Comprehensive Hormones) test, cortisol affects the function of hair follicles. During times of stress, elevated cortisol levels "can disrupt cell signaling, and oxidative stress can disrupt the normal transitions of the hair growth cycle."⁵

Connecting this to Kalisch's research, he noted that hair typically grows 1 centimeter over a month. And since the study participants return every three months, he's able to analyze the activity of the stress hormone system over longer periods.⁶ In short, he's using hair growth as a marker for stress levels.

For context, cortisol is a stress hormone, and while it's crucial for survival (such as keeping you alert during stressful times⁷), it can significantly affect your health when chronically elevated. For example, research has shown that cortisol affects your cognitive reserve, which is your brain's ability to maintain function despite showing signs of cognitive damage or age-related changes.

As noted in a study published in *Alzheimer's & Dementia*,⁸ stress diminishes your cognitive reserve, and reducing stress is important to keep your cognition in top shape.

Cortisol is also known as an aging hormone. When it's chronically elevated, it causes premature death because it is highly catabolic, meaning it breaks down tissues. As noted in a 2021 study,⁹ prolonged exposure to glucocorticoids (of which cortisol falls under) frequently causes muscle wasting and osteoporosis, as well as other issues such as central obesity and insulin resistance.

To combat the effects of cortisol, you need to enter an anabolic state, which means building healthy tissues like muscle and optimizing mitochondrial health. Again, high

cortisol levels significantly hinder these processes. To learn more about the negative effects of chronically elevated cortisol on your health, read my previous article, "[Important Information About Low Carb, Cortisol and Glucose.](#)"

Optimism – A Key Factor in Resilience

In one study,¹⁰ optimism is defined as "a cognitive variable reflecting one's favorable view about their future." Moreover, optimistic people tend to have more positive expectations and report lower levels of stress, even during challenging phases. Kalisch echoes similar theories and noted that cultivating optimism is a key factor in resilience. While his study isn't finished, here's what he currently knows:¹¹

"There seems to be a connection to optimism and the fact that people believe they can somehow cope, that it will probably work out somehow. That seems to be connected to resilience. So, someone who cultivates this kind of positive assessment style or develops it over time is less likely to be affected."

By lowering your stress levels, your body becomes healthier, as noted in a 2022 study¹² published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society. Based on data from 159,255 participants in the Women's Health Initiative, researchers found that greater optimism was associated with a longer lifespan, including exceptional longevity.¹³

Can You Learn Resilience?

While developing resilience will help you cope with the stress of everyday life, don't expect results right away. According to Michèle Wessa, Ph.D., resilience is something that happens very gradually – not an hour after taking a training program.¹⁴ That being said, start training your body to become resilient by becoming healthier with these strategies:

- **Increase your carb intake** – Raffael Kalisch notes that being healthy plays an important role in mental resilience. "The key to resilience is staying healthy even when faced with life's burdens," he says.¹⁵ And given the health ramifications of

cortisol, it's crucial to optimize your diet so that your body no longer has to create its own glucose.

To do this, focus on carbohydrates as the main source of energy. Carbs are also a better fuel than fat because they generate less reactive oxygen species (ROS) in your mitochondria. However, don't just eat any carb source, especially refined carbs from processed foods. It also has to be done in a strategic manner so you don't harm your health further.

Eating a high-fat diet inhibits carb metabolism, so when increasing your carbohydrates, lower your fat intake. If you eat a high-carb and a high-fat diet at the same time, your body won't be able to use the excess glucose for energy. Instead, it stays in your bloodstream, which raises your blood sugar levels. This puts you at risk for chronic diseases like diabetes. For your body to switch to carbs for energy, lower your fat intake below 30% of your daily calories.

For a detailed explanation on how carbs are the ideal fuel and can help reduce cortisol levels, read my article "[Key Strategies to Reduce Your Cortisol Levels](#)."

You also need to be strategic in upping your carb intake if your gut health is poor. Fiber-rich carbs and starches feed both pathogenic and beneficial gut bacteria, so you need to introduce these carbs slowly. If your gut is severely compromised, you may need to start your gut-healing journey by sipping on dextrose water, or add in more organic white rice.

This is a temporary measure to help your gut heal. I describe this strategy in great detail in my new "Cellular Health Guide."

- **Cultivate positive thinking** — Are you struggling to be more optimistic? If you're having trouble changing your outlook in life, don't worry — it's a skill that you can cultivate and hone further. Dr. Sue Varma, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at New York University and author of "Practical Optimism: The Art, Science, and Practice of Exceptional Well-Being," wrote in an NPR article:¹⁶

"Even if you were not born with this natural disposition to anticipate favorable outcomes and see the glass as half full, there are skills that you can learn. Begin by noticing how you deal with uncertainty. Do you tend to worry? Assume the worst? Try to reframe the thought in an objective manner. 'Is there a silver lining? Is this a problem to be solved or a truth to be accepted?'"

For a problem you're currently trying to overcome, Varma advises visualizing the best outcome, then creating a detailed step-by-step path to achieve it. This strategy fosters positive behavior, resilience, and the ability to bounce back from life's challenges. But optimism is not all about solving problems.

You will also find a sense of purpose by doing volunteer work. If you don't have the time to fit it into your schedule, Varma suggests making changes with your role at work to better fit your interests. This could be as simple as organizing outings with your colleagues to promote socialization.

Learning a new skill also fosters optimism. Pick something that you've been wanting to do for a long time. It could be anything, such as a new sport, musical instrument, language or a hobby that recently got your attention.

This approach will fill your mind with new, positive experiences and help distract you from negative thoughts. "Even with these and other interventions, it's not easy to change your mindset, but practice helps," Varma noted. "It's a toolset, it's a mindset. I have to practice it every day in my mind."

- **Take a walk outside** — In a study¹⁷ published in GeroScience, researchers highlighted the importance of regular physical activity in promoting healthy aging and longevity. In particular, they focused on walking, stating it's more than just a basic exercise — it's also a potent antiaging strategy.

It benefits both the body and mind, such as reducing the risk of Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, while also boosting sleep quality and cognitive function.

Interestingly, those are not the most striking findings in the study. The researchers noted that walking revitalizes your mitochondrial function. And as you can imagine, healthy mitochondria are important for overall health.

Specifically, increasing your physical movement stimulates the formation of new mitochondria and enhances the efficiency of existing ones, leading to improved energy production. This is particularly significant because mitochondrial damage due to aging.¹⁸

What is the ideal number of steps a day to maintain optimal health? According to a 2023 study,¹⁹ walking 8,000 steps once or twice a week significantly lowers your all-cause and cardiovascular mortality risk. However, I encourage you to go for a walk every day. In [my interview with cardiologist Dr. James O' Keefe](#), he noted that you can get the most out of walking by doing it consistently:

"Clearly, more is better. You get the big gains going from sedentary lifestyles – 2,000 to 3,000 steps a day – up to 7,000 or 8,000. [Here] you have this very steep reduction in mortality, improvement in survival. It continues to about 12,000 steps a day. Most of the studies show that it plateaus at 12,000."

- **Improve your sleep quality** – Traumatic events weaken your emotional resilience. However, there are ways to rebuild it and come back stronger, and one strategy is to get a good night's rest.

In a study²⁰ published in PLOS ONE, researchers noted that sleep quality was tied to the development of anxiety. Gathering 127 college students, they used a combination of qualitative models to explore the link between sleep quality and the progression of anxiety, which affects mental resilience.

In conclusion, they noted that poor sleep quality influences the onset of anxiety. To add, they observed that participants who already had strong mental resilience were able to cope with the effects of poor sleep and rectify their outlook to become more optimistic again.²¹

If you're having trouble sleeping, there are some things that will help boost your sleep quality. First, make sure your room is in complete darkness or as close as possible by using blackout curtains. If that's out of your budget, a well-fitted sleep mask is a practical alternative.

Removing all sources of electromagnetic fields (EMFs) from your room will also help. To do this, turn off your Wi-Fi at night, and move all digital devices (including alarm clocks) away from your bed by at least 3 feet. For additional tips, read my article "[Sleep Problems? Gardening May Help.](#)"

Sources and References

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