Connected Commons

LEADERSHIP

INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Resilience is a Team Sport:

The Invisible Ways Networks Create Resilience… For Those Who Have Invested Well

Rob Cross **Jean Singer** **Karen Dillon**

The authors are grateful for support and funding for the research behind this article from Innovation Resource Center for Human Resources (IRC4HR®).

About the Connected Commons

The Connected Commons, a consortium of major employers and people leaders co-managed by renowned thought leader Rob Cross and human capital research firm Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), applies organizational network research to impact business performance, workforce collaboration, and individual well-being.

For more information about Connected Commons, go to connectedcommons.org

To learn more about i4cp, go to i4cp.com

About the Authors

Rob Cross is the Edward A. Madden Professor of Global Leadership at Babson College, co-founder and research director of the Connected Commons, and a coauthor of *The Hidden Power of Social Networks* (Harvard Business review Press, 2004).

Jean Singer is a Principal with Collaborative Analytics and a co-editor of *The Organizational Network Field Book*.

Karen Dillon is a former editor of *Harvard Business Review* and a co-author of three books with Clayton Christensen, including the New York Times best-seller *How Will You Measure Your Life?*

We gratefully acknowledge the support and funding for this project from Innovation Resource Center for Human Resources (IRC4HR). www.irc4hr.org

What Makes Us Resilient?

You've inevitably been there. At some point, you've had a setback that threatened to derail you. Maybe it was a brutal stretch of work. Maybe an unexpected challenge with home and family. Or some combination of both. And in the crushing stress, it felt like you wouldn't survive. But you did, digging deep to find some magical inner reserve of strength that you didn't even know you had.

Or was there something more going on?

It may seem that you conjured up that inner strength through sheer personal will, but if you think about what was really happening for you at that time, the picture may be a little more complicated. Were there people who helped you through? Maybe someone actually helped solve your problem, or maybe they provided empathy, a fresh perspective, helped you visualize a path forward—or just injected some humor into a dark situation. What would you have done without them?

We are conditioned to think of resilience as something we find within ourselves. **But in reality, resilience is deeply impacted by our connections to others.**

Let us tell you one story.

An anesthesiologist we'll call Michael used to describe his job as "90 percent boredom, 10 percent horror." With a few exceptions of challenging surgeries and managing a department of several hundred physicians and nurses, most of the time, Michael's role was routine. But that was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Because anesthesiology is not a specialty that can resort to remote telemedicine, Michael and his team entered an overwhelmed hospital day after day. "For two months, I wasn't sleeping at night," he shared with us. "I was sending my team into battle with inadequate protection and not even really knowing how many of them would get sick." The burden of being responsible for both a team he cared deeply about and the lives of a huge volume of patients affected by the pandemic was crushing. Routinely putting in 16-hour days, Michael was having to determine how and when his team would work in these trying circumstances. "There were nights and weekends when some colleagues called me and were crying on the phone. Let's face it, they were scared for their lives." And Michael was, too.

But Michael didn't break. He and his team have held together as they continued to do their work throughout the pandemic. So, what allowed Michael to endure this period of extraordinary stress? While clearly a portion of Michael's fortitude came from personal strength, our discussion with him revealed a number of ways that relationships bolstered his resilience. He might not even have recognized this himself until we talked through it with him. But it became clear that a patchwork of different people in his network collectively played a critical role in helping Michael navigate and survive this extraordinary period—each offering a different perspective or helping hand in some way. First, his boss was a continual source of input, validation and confidence as he faced unprecedented medical and leadership challenges. "She always made herself available and these interactions helped me quit worrying endlessly about different decisions." In addition, he tapped into the strong working

relationship he had with another department head to jointly manage surges in workload. The resources he wasable to "borrow" from this colleague enabled him to push back on non-essential work as well as bypass typical bureaucratic gridlock to secure resources. "At a couple of really important junctures this helped us from getting overrun." And a very strong chief of staff stepped in and took ownership of several workstreams put in place to help deal with COVID. For Michael, knowing that this reliable person had those domains in hand "took stress from a 10 to an 8 many times." Even his daily exchanges with his office manager played a critical role because she was able to find ways to laugh with him even under this stress. "It wasn't gallows humor but sarcastic comments about difficult people or situations that lightened things for us and made us feel we were on the same team," he recalled.

Michael was also lucky in that home was a refuge for him through this time. His wife, who also had a medical background, provided an outlet to vent that yielded both empathy and possible solutions. His children even played a role that he did not realize until past the early crisis: "They were proud of me. They would tell me this and it was better than anything else to help me buckle down and keep pushing through."

Resilience, conventional thinking assumes, is something we find within ourselves when we are tested, a kind of solitary internal grit that allows us to bounce back. But that's not necessarily true. As Michael's story illustrates, the ability to rebound from challenges is not something we develop in isolation. We nurture and build our resilience through the variety of relationships we have with people in our personal and professional lives. It's in the interactions themselves—conversations that validate our plans, reframe our perspective on a situation, help us laugh and feel authentic, or just encourage us to get back up and try again—that we become resilient. Yes, we're all told to build a network to help further our careers, but what's important to understand is how essential these relationships can also be to our day-to-day emotional well-being. In short, resilience is not something we find just by digging down inside ourselves; we actually become more resilient through the strength of our relationships with others.

The Importance of Resilience in Challenging Times

The ability to rebound from setbacks is often described as the difference between successful and unsuccessful people. Technology shifts and ever-increasing productivity demands means we're almost never "off duty" from work, where constant changes in priorities, leadership, and strategies are the norm. We're always trying to catch up. These shifting pressures are so ever-present that we're not even aware of the toll they're taking. That's where resilience becomes essential. Resilience helps us to adapt and even grow in response to the challenges before us.

Without the moderating effects of resilience, we are susceptible to a stress response familiarly known as "fight, flight or freeze."[1] Our body ramps up stress hormones, raising our heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. While fight/flight/freeze can be useful in response to imminent physical danger, such as a growling dog, in which we need to be narrowly focused and our survival instincts on high alert, repeated and ongoing activation of the stress response can make us anxious, depressed, or physically ill.[2–5]

An unrelenting stress response can also impair our ability to make clear decisions and take constructive action. It inhibits our brain's executive function—the cognitive center that keeps us organized and on task, enables us to shift with changes, and controls working memory. In essence, fight/flight/freeze shuts down the areas of the brain we need most for analyzing information and solving problems. And if we're narrowly focused on survival rather than broadly seeking novel solutions, we're not in a good position to adapt to change. People with resilience find ways to keep these detrimental stress responses in check.

Not surprisingly, then, more resilient people have been found to be higher performers, and have an edge when competing for jobs or promotions.[6,7] Resilience has been shown to protect against burnout[8,9], and with higher levels of hope and optimism, resilient people are better able to cope with demanding jobs[10] and economic hardship.[11] They are less likely to become physically or mentally ill during challenging times[7], and tend to have higher levels of work satisfaction.[8,12,13] When the environment around them changes and their skills become outdated, people with resilience are better able to learn new ones.[14]

Resilient people are also better able to turn adversity and disruption into opportunities for growth, and find new ways of working and living.[15] While Nietzche's saying that, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger" seems extreme, it contains a fundamental truth. People with resilience are able to change how they view situations and rather than becoming more rigid, they become more agile and stronger in the face of life disruptions. Resilience enables us to "overcome adversity, heal and strive towards self-actualization and flourishing."[1,16]

Researchers have also found a relationship between resilience and longevity. The effect is especially pronounced at very advanced ages, where studies find that centenarians are significantly more resilient than any other old-age group. If you're in your 90s, you're 43% more likely to make it to 100 if you have higher resilience.[17,18] And those extra years are likely to be good ones as resilience is associated with greater happiness, lower depression, and greater satisfaction with your marriage and your life[19–21]

Resilience enables us to cope with the ups and downs that life throws at us and even learn, grow, and flourish in the process. How then do we build this remarkable capacity? Some prescriptions focus on positivity and strategies such as choosing positive thoughts and optimistic attitudes, keeping negative or overwhelming emotions such as fear, hurt, or anger in check, and concentrating on what is purposeful and gives our lives meaning.[1,22,23] Other approaches suggest we maintain a sense of control or action orientation, and advocate strategies such as self-care or reaching outside ourselves for support.[1]

But is resilience a solitary activity like these prescriptions suggest? We think not. Think about your response to a tough time, as we proposed in the opening of this paper. Did you truly go it alone? Or were there people around you who provided important support? What is often underestimated and rarely described in detail is how our *connections with others* underlie our ability to maintain positive attitudes and emotions, and how relationships empower us to take action in the face of adversity.

SEEING YOUR INVISIBLE RESILIENCE NETWORK

The chart below can help you to see the invisible network that enables you to be resilient in the face of adversity. Think back to a tough stretch in your life where you faced a significant difficulty, setback, or shock. Briefly describe it below. Now, use the prompts in the left column to see if you can recall who was there at the time and what they did to help you through. Write the names of one or more people who provided you with each of the different sources of resilience.

Briefly describe the challenging time:

SOURCES OF RESILIENCE	NAME(S)
Someone who helped me to **manage a surge** at work or at home. *When you were overwhelmed by demands, this person may have come through with resources or their own time and talents to help you through.*	
Someone who helped me to **make sense** of people or politics. *This person might have had more experience or a broader view and could help you to better understand others' behavior.*	
Someone who provided **empathic support** so I could release my emotions and stay balanced. *This person may have let you vent, was able to commiserate, or just made you feel like there was another person there to listen.*	
Someone who helped me see a **path forward** *When you were in need of practical advice, this person may have helped you with suggestions, explained how they handled something similar, or let you see some of the options you could consider.*	
Someone who gave me a different **perspective** *When you were over-thinking or about to drown in self-pity, this person may have helped you to see that it's not as bad as you think.*	
Someone who helped me to **laugh** at myself or my situation. *This person may have diffused the tension by injecting humor.*	
Someone who reminded me of the **purpose or meaning** in my life. *This person may have reminded you of your higher aspirations or given you motivation to persevere.*	
Someone who let me **unplug or take a break** from my challenges *You may have done something with this person—a sport, hiking, a getaway—that was completely unrelated to your challenge so your mind and body got a break.*	

Looking down the right hand column, you can see the people who made up your resilience network for this challenge. Think how difficult it would have been without them—or if you have some blanks, how much easier it would have been to have someone there. You might also check to see if there is one person—maybe your spouse—listed over and over. Over-reliance on a single person means your resilience network might not be that resilient!

Eight Ways that Relationships Build Resilience

Based on in-depth interviews with 200 leaders (five men and five women from 20 different organizations), we have defined how connections help us become more resilient when we encounter major life or professional challenges. A well-developed network of relationships can enable us to rebound from setbacks by:

1. Helping us ***manage surges*** at work or at home
2. ***Making sense*** of people or politics
3. Providing ***empathic support*** so we can release emotions and stay balanced
4. Helping us see and pursue a ***path forward***
5. Giving us **perspective** when setbacks happen
6. Helping us to ***laugh*** at ourselves and the situation
7. Reminding us of the ***purpose or meaning*** in our lives
8. Enabling us to ***unplug and take a break*** from challenges

1 Helping us to *manage surges* at work or at home

All of us face times in our lives when the demands at home or at work spike and we're not quite sure how we're going to handle it all. Surges can happen when our boss or client makes an unexpected demand of us, when we have a sick parent or child, when an organizational merger or transformation generates work for us, or even when positive life events occur such as a promotion or the birth of a child. Events such as these can throw us off balance and undermine our sense of control over our lives. People who are resilient are able to reestablish their sense of control and take action to influence the events that follow. But practically speaking, as individuals, we're limited in what we can control, and that's one reason why relationships are so important to resilience. Through our connections with others, we are better able to find the skills, talents, and will to handle complex challenges, and when we pool our time and energy, we're better able to get through times that would otherwise stretch us too thin.

Consider, for example, Nestor, the head of the ICU at a major metropolitan hospital. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he was faced with the biggest surge of his life. Somehow, he had to more than double the existing ICU capacity, going from 20 beds to 50 beds in the space of a week, then again from 50 beds to 80. The challenge left him mentally paralyzed. But he didn't stay in fight/flight/freeze mode for long. When his wife said, "I see you're stumped. You've never been stumped", he replied, "I am, but I'm going to get unstumped." He decided to appropriate an entire ward from another unit and reconfigure it on the fly. The problem was, he didn't have $30 million and a year to do it. But what he did have was a long-standing network of honest relationships with the shop workers throughout the hospital. "I know all the carpenters and their bosses. I know all the electricians. I know the plumbers. I know everybody. And they know I don't waste anybody's time."

ICU rooms have to provide direct visibility of patients from the hallway, usually through glass doors. Nestor's problem was that the existing hospital doors were made of solid wood. He called the head of the carpentry shop with whom he had a 20-year relationship and said, "You have to go up to this floor and you have to figure out over 48 hours how to put windows into 23 solid doors." After silence on the other end of the line, he heard, "OK", and 24 hours later, they had windows installed in the doors.

Nestor's relationships extended beyond the hospital. One day, while the carpenters were cutting holes in the doors, he got a call from the CEO of the technology company they used for remote monitoring of ICU equipment. Because of their many-year relationship, the CEO had just called up and asked, "Can I help you with anything?" To which Nestor responded, "As a matter of fact, you can." Nestor was faced with the problem that excellent ICU care is rendered at bedside but with an airborne disease like COVID, if you render too much at bedside, you put your nurse at risk. He needed an iPad outside each ICU room that mirrored all the information on the monitors inside. "Does that exist?", he asked the tech CEO. "No. It exists for the format of a phone. The format you're looking for needs coding." "OK, you called me. Can you do it?" The CEO deployed an army of programmers and in real-time they worked together with the nursing staff to build and test the new technology, all in the course of just a few days. According to Nestor, "All that happened because of relationships."

Because he had invested years ago in trusting relationships with the people around him, Nestor was able to go from being stuck to accomplishing the seemingly impossible. Knowing he had those relationships gave him the confidence to imagine building an ICU in a week and the resources to make it happen. Can you think of a time when you faced what might have seemed an overwhelming surge at home or at work? But somehow you survived it. In hindsight, it probably wasn't entirely on your own. Who helped pull you through, acting as a safety net, or otherwise stepping in to help out?

We heard in our interviews numerous ways that relationships helped people to manage surges and bounce back from what otherwise might be overwhelming circumstances. In some cases, it involved having a group of local friends to call on in an emergency when they needed someone to watch the kids. Or having a network of family and friends to pick up the slack when an aging parent falls and ends up in rehab, creating a surge in family responsibilities that lasts months. During a surge on the home front, people benefitted from being able to hand off work to a peer, or having an understanding boss who would provide some time off. Often, people described situations at work where a big project would come at them like a tsunami but they were able to cope by rallying a team of colleagues of varying expertise or across functional lines, or were able to stay focused because they had a boss who protected them from the heated political debates. In all these cases, knowing they had a supportive network to call upon gave people the confidence that they could pull through, and relationships built over time enabled them to manage demands larger than their individual capacities.

❷ *Making sense* of people or politics

Often, the problems that faze us have nothing to do with the actual demands of our work but are all about making sense of people and politics. We can get unnerved by incidents as subtle as an off-hand remark made by an executive that starts us thinking that we did or said something wrong, or by events as obviously challenging as when you join a new organization and feel clueless about the norms for getting things done. Feeling that we don't quite get the people or politics around us can throw us off our game and keep us up at night playing and replaying events in our heads to try and figure them out. By ourselves, we're unlikely to be able to break through the limits of our own experience or perspectives; we need relationships with others to help make sense of it all.

Meghan, for example, a senior manager in the healthcare industry, had just relocated to the home office from one of her company's remote locations. Fortunately, she had a relationship built up over time with the headquarters HR person, who could act as a personal sounding board and who knew the business and the people. As Meghan described it, "He was able to provide good political advice, like 'this is who you want to get close to,' and 'these are the things you want to watch out for with this other individual.'" When Meghan had an initiative she needed to drive forward across the organization and was confounded about how to get from point A to point B, her colleague gave her a roadmap: "first you take it to this person and this person, then you take it to this committee."

At one point, Meghan had a conversation with her boss that left her confused. They had been discussing some highly confidential material and he made a comment about them discussing it so "casually." Meghan kept ruminating over what he meant by that and her stress began to rise. Fortunately, she had kept in touch with a group of peers from her prior location and was able to reach out to one of them with her concerns. The peer helped her to come up with different theories and reset her perspective on what her boss may have meant. Probably he was just a little nervous himself about having access to the information and that was his way of getting it off his chest. It was a great relief to Meghan because if she hadn't had the opportunity to make sense of it, she would have gotten hung up and "it would have been another dumb thing that I think about at one o'clock in the morning." Talking it through with a peer helped her to feel calm and put her mind at ease.

Sometimes, the person you need the most help making sense of is yourself. Meghan relies heavily on her spouse when she loses perspective and needs to be reminded of who she is. In one instance, Meghan was feeling like the project she was working on was spinning out of control. Her husband reminded her, "Meghan, you like structure. The project is at a point where you're looking for structure but you're not going to find it. But you thrive when you can take ambiguous situations and bring order to them. So just do it your way." Meghan was better able to make sense of her own behaviors seeing them through the eyes of someone who knew her well.

Who helps you to make sense of the politics in your organization or the behaviors of the people around you? Who helps you to understand your own reactions better? We heard from our interviewees about the importance of sense-making in a variety of circumstances, such as figuring out how to navigate a new managerial level as a woman or understanding the personalities of decision-makers and how to present to them. Our interviewees benefitted from advice on how to deal effectively with egos, what the mindset was at corporate on a given issue, or just figuring out "why would a person do that?" When faced with people or politics that confounded them, they were able to avoid getting bogged down with worry and self-doubt by relying on insights and advice from others.

❸ Providing *empathic support* so we can release emotions and stay balanced

Sometimes we just need to vent, to commiserate or to feel like there's someone to listen to our troubles. We may get frustrated and need a safe place to complain without being seen as a whiner, or have someone talk us "off the ledge" so we don't run out and do something rash. We might need someone who understands the challenges of our work or the oddball members of our family—or the specifics might be totally irrelevant and we just need an ally, someone who is there for us regardless of the situation. One of the keys to resilience is handling strong or difficult emotions, and empathic support in these various forms helps us to keep our emotional balance and stability.

When we reach out to someone for empathic support, we're looking to be heard and validated, and are not necessarily interested in advice or guidance. Many a spouse has learned this lesson the hard way, after offering practical solutions in response to their partner's call simply to be heard. But when it goes right, as one investment banker described, "I react, and he just listens. It's just being able to vent and talk and feel what I feel. And it's less about his advice—it's that he just listens, and he knows that I'm going to get worked up about it. And then he'll say, 'Don't worry,' and, 'It'll be okay.'"

Why does empathic support help? We heard three perspectives. One is that of emotional release. You can get angry about something, and then you get over it, you're not

that angry anymore and your more rational capabilities (to plan and take action) or creative instincts can take over and allow you to move on. The second has to do with validation. Someone else vicariously experiences your predicament, understands it, and confirms that what you're dealing with is really hard. And the third is about caring. Just knowing that someone is there for you can have a calming effect and give you the confidence that comes with not having to face adversity alone. One interviewee described the feeling he got from others in his church group after a dear friend had died: "It's the power of presence. Folks didn't even have to say anything. They would just sit and spend time with me and then just let me know that they cared about me."

Gabe, a technology executive, relies heavily on his wife and a core group of friends for empathic support. His wife works at the same company and they have what he calls "mutual bitch sessions" about what's ridiculous at work. She's a great listener and provides a safe place for him to talk through his frustrations with hard decisions or people problems. Just saying things out loud seems to bring Gabe greater clarity and calm. His wife will often reassure him that the issues he faces would be tough for anyone to handle, and reminds him that he can be his own worst critic and too hard on himself. Gabe also lets off steam with his friend group. They're not just corporate types but a diverse group ranging from IT people like himself to a professional cartoonist, and when he's with them he feels he can joke around and be himself. "Just being able to commiserate with them recharges my batteries." At times, the group becomes philosophical, and the conversations turn to questions of why we're here and what we're doing with the time we have left. In all, Gabe says, "there's comfort in knowing you're not alone in muddling through."

People find empathic support in relationships with parents, siblings, former bosses, and some even vent to their dog or the steering wheel on their commute to work. Spouses or partners can be an especially strong source of empathic support, although some interviewees preferred to leave work behind them at the end of the day and not unload about it at home. We consistently heard that finding colleagues with whom you can unload your emotional burdens gets harder as you rise in the hierarchy. Executives often feel uncomfortable confiding in their subordinates and the peer group shrinks as they become more senior. Sharing with peers, too, risks making you feel vulnerable. Leaders may find they need to rely more on confiding relationships with family and friends, or former colleagues and bosses, keeping in mind that empathic support from others is critical to resilience at any level.

4 Helping us see and pursue a *path forward*

There's such a thing as too much empathy. It helps to have an emotional outlet and to know that others are there for us, but ultimately, the venting must come to an end and we need a practical way to move forward. Relationships with others help us to bounce back by enabling us to take action or just see that we have options for dealing with the problems we face. There are two ways they do this:

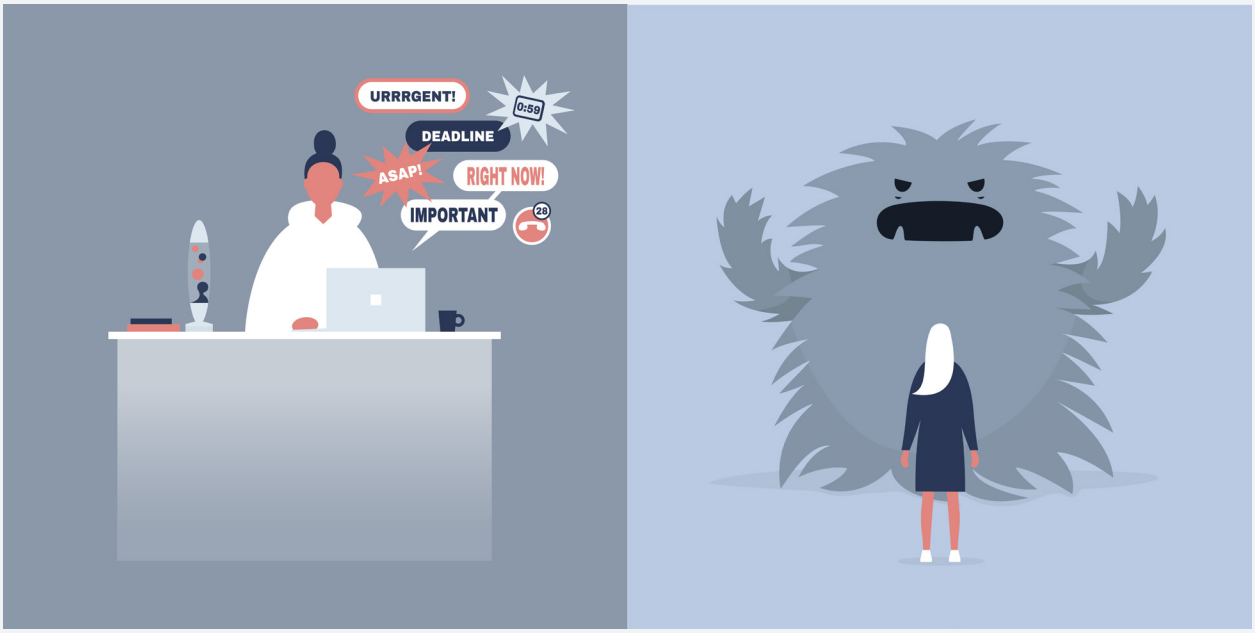
- Cognitively, they help us see how to approach a situation, such as the former boss who shares their advice on how to get a difficult team engaged or a co-worker who suggests various ways to tackle a technical problem.
- Motivationally, they push us to take steps or hold us accountable; for example, the spouse or partner who checks in with us to see if we had that difficult conversation with our boss.

Whereas we can get empathy from anyone who cares about us, the people best positioned to help us see and pursue a path forward often know enough about the situation (e.g., the industry, company, or family) and the interdependence of issues and personalities to be able to provide advice and suggest options. *Empathy* and a *path forward* can come from the same person or different people—either way, you're better off if you have them both in your network.

Consider Isabel, the leader of a manufacturing function, who has both work colleagues and family to turn to when things get tough. Her sister and brother are both technical people working in business like herself, so they speak the same language and can understand similar problems. She can turn to them for an outsider's perspective, but one that's informed by similar challenges. She might call her sister and say, "Hey, I'm really stalled getting people to buy in to a new system. How do you do it? What strategies have you used to allow people to feel like their voices matter and they can be part of the change?" When Isabel went from overseeing a small group to a much bigger and broader one, she was able to lean on her brother's experience in delegating. "How do you identify that certain people are ready and primed for some of the delegation, and the people who aren't, how do you get them to that spot?" Or, "How did you convince them to take that leap?"

The support runs both ways, and often Isabel will help out her siblings as well. Sometimes they're seeking advice or information from each other, sometimes it's "Hey can you let me complain? I don't need any advice right now. I just want to complain," and other times, it's both. On some occasions, Isabel wants to reach out to people different from herself—those she doesn't know that well or who would approach things completely differently. Then she may draw on colleagues from a different division or people at other companies she's met at industry conferences.

RESILIENCE IS NEEDED FOR BOTH SURGES AND MICRO-STRESSORS



Sometimes we need resilience to help us endure a major crisis or setback in our lives such as the one Nestor, the ICU director we described here, faced in the early days of Covid, or for example, when our responsibilities at home surge due to an aging parent who falls or a child who becomes sick. Our relationships with others help us to manage these surges and come through them OK. But adversity doesn't always come in big waves. In fact, some of the most challenging times can be those when we face a slow but steady stream of smaller challenges that chip away at our fortitude. We refer to these as "micro-stressors."[24] They cover a whole range of daily challenges such as the tensions when colleagues in different functions misunderstand each other, when a leader keeps changing priorities, or when colleagues don't reliably deliver. Or when we have to have a confrontational conversation, don't feel like we can entirely trust a co-worker, or are worried about the well-being of a family member. Micro-stressors can drain our capacity to get work done and deplete our emotional reserves, over time leaving us feeling exhausted or burned out. Our relationships with others help us to persevere in all the ways discussed here, such as letting us laugh at the absurdity of a situation, putting it all in perspective, or lending an ear to listen to our troubles. Relationships are equally important to resilience whether we face a major crisis or the day-to-day challenge of micro-stressors.

That way, she says, "I can get somebody to help me think about it in a new way—or have a different perspective around it." Isabel rarely gets stuck or frozen with indecision because her network of relationships provides her with expertise, ideas, and options, and the confidence to move forward.

A supportive boss can be essential to helping us find a path forward, often by providing instrumental support or using their decision-making authority to help us. Albert, for example, a manager in a manufacturing firm, had just gotten a promotion that required him to relocate to the Midwest. But his young son flipped over on a swing, had to be rushed to the emergency room and ended up in a body cast with six months of rehab in front of him. Albert didn't see how he could possibly move to the Midwest at this point and figured he was going to have to pass up the promotion. But his boss said, "Don't worry about it. Go take care of your son. We'll hold the position for you. When you're ready, we'll figure out how you can commute it." Then, later that year, just months after Albert relocated, the new house he had bought burned to the ground. The insurance company was proving difficult to deal with and Albert found himself squeezed between needing to be home to meet the insurance adjuster and at the plant to fulfill his job. His boss helped him find a way to shift around his

schedule, spending some time with his team at the plant and working some later hours in the evening. The relationship he had with his boss—one in which he was trusted and known to be reliable—enabled him to find a path forward and get back on his feet after a series of truly hard setbacks.

Our interviewees got practical advice and support from a range of relationships, including parents, co-workers, friends, spouses and contacts working at other companies. These relationships provided them with a much wider range of possibilities to consider than they would have been able to come up with on their own, and helped motivate them to move on. Without support and guidance from others, they were at risk for getting stuck and ruminating over and over on their dilemma without making any progress. But by plugging into their connections, they were able to take action rather than getting stalled by the challenges they faced.

5 Giving us *perspective* when setbacks happen

Resilience often depends on our ability to keep negative thoughts, feelings and attitudes at bay and see the larger picture of what's promising or not so bad after all. It's sometimes referred to as "de-catastrophizing"—the ability to see events in the perspective of a broader trajectory and therefore put them in a different, more positive light. But it can be heavy cognitive lifting to do this on our own, and we fare much better when we have others to help give us perspective.

One type of perspective we get from others is the *"knock it off"* variety, when we're caught in a rut of overthinking, stressing or being self-critical. A spouse might cut short our descent into self-doubt by saying "You're spending too much time thinking. Get out of your head. Nobody really cares." When we're feeling like everything is our fault and we can't get anything right, a trusted friend or colleague can point out that after years of achievement, we didn't suddenly wake up this morning a total incompetent.

Other people can help us realize that the problem isn't always us. Maybe you had a bad interaction with your boss because he just had a horrible meeting right before you; it was nothing you did. Or if you've lost your confidence, other people can stop you from giving up on yourself. One of our interviewees, a banker, had a bad year with her investments and was ready to throw in the towel. "I am the worst investor," she told her best friend. "I don't want to touch money again. I'm moving to sales." With a roll of the eyes, her friend said, "You're ridiculous. Go back to work. You're smart and good at what you do. You'll be fine."

Or other people can help us to right-size a problem, taking something that feels so big and weighty and cutting it down to size. For example, when something goes wrong and you're feeling like it was a career-ending move, a more experienced peer in your department might say, "Oh, don't worry about that. It's happened before. Just learn from it and move on." And you breathe a sigh of relief and move on. Connecting with people in these ways helps us to feel validated, that we're still good people and capable at what we do.

Another form of perspective helps us to see events or setbacks in a larger context. When faced with a challenge, we often benefit from a *sounding board*, the perspective of someone who perhaps has more experience or context, or can look at things without the emotions or biases we ourselves bring. One interviewee we spoke with described how she had been cut out of an important meeting and was ready to go raging into the director's office. But she first phoned a trusted colleague and said, "Hey, let me bounce something off of you." The colleague advised her to sit on it for a couple of weeks, which turned out to be the right move.

People outside of our normal spheres of work and home can be particularly effective as sounding boards. One interviewee who works in healthcare goes hiking with a group of engineers from different industries and told us how sometimes she shares with them about an incident at work and they ask a question she would never have thought of because she's so "eyeballs deep into it." Others can help us to be more of a critical thinker or challenge our assumptions. A trusted friend or colleague might be able to say, "Okay. I hear you, why are you being so short-sighted?" Outsiders who are removed from our situation might be more objective because they're more removed from the consequences. A physician we spoke to found great relief interacting with people on the business side of the hospital because they were not doing medicine and "They have more of a bottom line view whereas I, as a doctor, have a more emotional component."

Our connections with others also play a critical role as a *touchstone to our core values*. They give us perspective on what's important and how well we're hewing to our "north star" priorities. We can get stuck in the weeds of day-to-day life and they help pull us out or call us on it when we start to lose sight of what's important. One tech executive described to us how he still calls his mother when he is down and says, "Listen, I've had this crappy day." She has no idea what he does but it really doesn't matter, because she says, ""Well, did you put in your best effort? Did you have integrity when you did it?" and it puts things back in perspective for him. Another of our interviewees does volunteer work with struggling kids and finds a dimensionality there that shakes her out of her own little world of upper-middle class concerns. "You know, two blocks

from my house there are kids who don't have running water. And they don't have access to education." It makes her pause for a moment and consider a different perspective.

We heard a good example of how other people help give us perspective from Lara, the head of a scientific research lab, who was struggling with how she could work with her new boss. They had different ideas about lab management and Lara felt her boss was intruding where Lara, the expert, should have had free rein to operate. As their conflict escalated, Lara alternated between thinking, "I can't believe this is happening to me" and "What am I doing wrong?" Her husband was supportive and to some degree could help her see that she might be over-sensitive to the actions of her boss, but the working relationship continued to deteriorate and with it Lara's optimism and enjoyment of her job. She was starting to sink into self-doubt when she attended a conference and had dinner with some colleagues from another university. As it turned out, one of the colleagues was having the exact same issues of setting boundaries with his boss. What? This guy who is brilliant and well-liked by everyone he meets is having relationship problems with his boss?

Once the door was opened, others in the group chimed in with similar experiences. Knowing that it happened to a lot of people instantly gave Lara a boost in confidence. Her catastrophe didn't seem so large. And the colleagues were able to give her pointers on how they had resolved or moved past the relationship issues in their workplaces. Lara regained faith that she could somehow work it out and return to enjoyment and success on the job. She just needed the perspective of others to understand that her situation was not unique, she wasn't somehow deficient, and there were ways to handle it.

The people who give us perspective serve as our "truth-tellers"—they know us well enough that they can point out ways we may be overreacting or that we have certain tendencies in a situation (e.g., to over-worry). We can listen to them without getting defensive and feel like they've opened our eyes and set things on a better course. These relationships can be with virtually anyone. Most often, people mentioned their spouse but those aperture-widening relationships could also be with former bosses, friends, a coach or mentor, or co-workers in another division. Kids can be an instant source of perspective, as one interviewee stated, "You go home and you're like, dude, none of this stuff at work really matters." Outsiders, whether colleagues you don't work with daily or connections outside your organization can bring added dimensionality and a fresh pair of eyes. The common denominator is that they are people you trust and who will be straight with you. The added perspective we get from these people stops us from magnifying the bad of our circumstances and opens our eyes to the positive in our situation or ourselves that we might not otherwise see.

6 Helping us to *laugh* at ourselves and the situation

Laughter has a rejuvenating effect. If we can laugh at ourselves or our situation, it all doesn't seem so bad. There's a physiological reason for this. Laughter activates the neural pathways of emotions like joy and mirth, thereby improving mood and reducing the physical and emotional response to stress. Laughter controls brain levels of serotonin and limits stress hormones like cortisol—acting like a modern-day antidepressant but without the side effects. [25]

Laughter is a healthy coping mechanism. When you laugh, you are taking yourself or your situation less seriously. The positive feelings that accompany laughter are associated with an appreciation for life and, at least among older adults, taking a benign view of the difficulties they've faced over a lifetime.[26,27] A growing number of therapists are using laughter interventions to help build well-being, with assignments such as surrounding yourself with funny people, watching a comedy that makes you laugh, or writing down three funny things that happened today.[28]

There's evidence that we laugh best when we laugh with others. According to linguist Don Nilson, chuckles and belly laughs seldom happen when we are alone.[29] It's in the company of others that we most connect with the absurdities of life and see the lighter side of things, even under challenging circumstances.

Through our interviews, we saw laughter reviving spirits in two ways. One is to break the tension in a difficult situation such as a demanding project or a meeting that is getting too heavy. The lighter moments help everyone to relax and reset to where they can think better, be more creative, and just feel human. As one senior leader expressed, "It kind of lowers the blood pressure, right? It's like, 'Hey, this doesn't have to just be stress and business. We can have fun while we do this.'" The second way is helping us to reset and distance from the situation in the company of others, whether over a glass of wine with friends or with other parents at the kids' soccer game.

Consider, for example, Chandra, an IT executive who had been an Olympic caliber athlete. During her high school and college years, she suffered multiple injuries but toughed it out to come back time and again. The first time she got hurt, she had a private physical therapist who was anxious to get her back on the playing field, more motivated than Chandra herself felt at the time. Chandra was angry, and as she described it, "not the most fun person to be around." But the PT figured out that he could connect with Chandra through humor. He would go out

of his way to joke with her and get her laughing before putting her through a particularly grueling exercise, and his banter made the workouts she would dread easier to handle. As a result, Chandra didn't begrudge him for what she had to do or use him as a target for her angst and frustration. If he hadn't built that rapport, Chandra said, "I definitely would have hated him." It still wasn't fun, but to this day, she remembers how his joking would set her at ease and when he said, "Let's jump on the equipment," she was ready to go.

Our interviewees described numerous ways that humor shared with others lightened their days and made stressful times easier to handle. One, for example, described how he has a group of ski buddies, all professionals, who text each other through the day. He'll be in a serious meeting and get a text from one of these guys that just cracks him up. It's banter and teasing and cutting each other up that turns hilarious, and it all helps him to handle the stress. Another described how her husband breaks out his corny humor when he sees she's down in the dumps. She smiles, and it gives her a lift (even though, she says, he's not funny). One leader described a friend who she can call when she feels like the world is against her and after a while, the friend will say, "OK, enough with that" and launch into a humorous tirade. "It can be so off the wall, but it just stops the train from continuing that direction of pity."

Laughing at the absurdities of everyday life helps when we can do it with friends. Especially those who agree that sometimes it's all comical and absurd and there's much more to life than work, so let's laugh and have fun, like going camping, and throwing Frisbees.

7 Reminding us of the *purpose or meaning* in our lives

A sense of purpose not only gives us the drive to accomplish our goals, but helps us to better handle stresses along the way and rebound when faced with adversity. With a strong underlying sense of meaning in what we do, we are more likely to reframe stressful situations in ways that make them more tolerable. Research has shown that people with greater purpose in their lives demonstrate greater capacity to regulate negative emotions—making it less likely that they will be dragged down by fears or anxiety.[30–32] As a result, "people who have a clear purpose and direction in their lives find it easier to pick themselves up, dust themselves off and keep moving forward."[33]

If purpose plays such an important role in resilience, how do we find it? Most people, when asked, would point to noble pursuits, things such as ending world hunger, fighting for social justice, or curing disease. But what they often miss is the fact that it's not just what we're doing, but who we're doing it with. We've seen through our research on well-being that people in organizations doing noble work can still be among the unhappiest, while those doing seemingly mundane things can be imbued with an unerring sense of purpose. Critical to purpose are interactions with other people in the context of things such as giving of ourselves (using your time and talents to help others), co-creating (working together with a deep sense of trust, commitment, and rapport, and building on each other's ideas), and putting shared values into practice (doing the "right thing" with others who feel similarly).[34]

Warren, for example, a former army commander in Iraq, knew that a sense of purpose was key to the ability of his troops to survive both physically and emotionally in the face of war. Their relationships with each other and with him were essential to finding that purpose. Warren had seen how a sense of purpose had enabled him to do a job that was very tough throughout years of military service. And so he knew that others had to have purpose if they were going to come out alive and avoid their "own personal emotional trauma." The connection with his troops was personal. He compared them to his own kids, safe at home—some of the soldiers were even younger— and thought about the parents who had entrusted their children to him. As Warren described, "I needed to connect with them in a way that was individual and yet in the aggregate. I mean, I got 700 people. I couldn't know them all individually, but they had to feel like I did. They had to think I cared about each and every one of them. And I had to help each one of them feel like what they were doing was meaningful and important and worth the risk so that they would simply keep their head in the game." It doesn't get any more purposeful than that.

Warren recalled sitting down with his entire unit, all 700 of them, in the middle of Iraq and having a discussion about, "Why are we really even here?", and his efforts to relate to all of them, from the 20-year-olds who couldn't balance a checkbook to the physicians who made more money than he did, and were dying to get out of combat so they could go back to their practice. It was a values discussion, geared towards trying to get them to understand how this might be meaningful on an individual level, but also to give purpose and meaning to what they were trying to do collectively as a unit. Because Warren knew that their sense of purpose—and consequently their ability to rebound day-to-day and tolerate the scars that war would inevitably inflict—was vitally dependent on their relationships with each other and with him.

We heard numerous ways that our interviewees relied on a sense of purpose to keep them hopeful and determined. One leader who was also an elite soccer player described how after a serious injury kept her off the soccer field, her feelings

of commitment to the team kept her involved as a coach and supporter, and gave her incentive to keep working on rehab. The sense of loyalty and desire to not let them down was a strong driver throughout. A physician described how it's easy to get all worked up over a research project that's getting bogged down in logistics or bureaucracy. But then knowing that twice a week she would be seeing patients in clinic, and her sense that they needed her to advocate to get a trial through the bureaucracy and get drugs to patients who need them, gave her renewed energy and determinaton.

Stories included an executive who was driven to get back on her feet after domestic violence so she could help others in need; anHR manager who never lost sight of her goal of keeping people engaged despite the challenges of a major transformation; and a number of executives who were determined to handle work stress better so they could come home and have patience with the kids. In all these cases, a sense of purpose, grounded in relationships with others, helped to bolster resilience.

8 Enabling us to *unplug and take a break* from challenges

We all need to refresh and recharge by taking a break from our problems. We can then come back to them with renewed passion and determination because our minds have had the opportunity to be elsewhere. Research finds that when we come back from a break, we have enhanced ability to focus our attention and may find our sense of well-being restored.[35] While sometimes it might help to sit atop a mountain in solitary reflection, we most often heard our interviewees describe how it was in the company of others that they were able to unplug.

Bryant, a financial executive, unplugs by spending time with his family, his church, and his motorcycle club. He considers himself a hard worker and a family man, and well-dedicated to both. When he's at work, that gets all of his attention and when he's with family, it's all about them. Biking is the one thing he can do that lets him get away from both. The guys he rides with don't work with him, so he's free from workplace stress, and they're not in his family, so he doesn't have to talk about the drama at home. When he's with them, he's not an executive or a dad, just a biker. As a result, he can completely unwind. It's just a bunch of guys going 70 or 80 miles per hour, out there to do one thing and one thing only, and that's ride and enjoy. Bryant calls it "the best stress reliever in the world."

Anna, a technology executive, does yoga and pilates, working with two trainers who help her to refocus her energy away from work and on to her physical and spiritual self. "I realized I never breathe…I never took a deep breath." Anna could see how tense she had become and worked on relaxation through posture and awareness of body and self. She had to give the workouts her complete concentration so she could keep track of the complex combinations the trainers were having her to and not fall over or hurt herself. Her absorption in the workouts was complete. Whether she had worries about work or her kids, or was feeling anxious, she couldn't do it in that space.

But doing that takes deliberate effort. Just showing up for the sessions was not enough. Anna had to be deeply committed to surrendering herself fully to the experience for them to provide any real relief for her.

Even finding healthy outlets to "escape" takes work. And for many of us, it becomes even more challenging as we get older. By the time we move into our late 30s and early 40s, we tend to drop some of the connections that once were essential to our overall well-being. Friends and outside hobbies become a lower priority when we're constantly under the gun to be productive at work or tend to family responsibilities.

Add into the mix the pressures of COVID, in which many of us are at our desk at home earlier and later and nearly constantly on some form of collaborative technology. Researchers at Atlassian, a developer of workplace software, looked at the behavior of users in 65 countries during the pandemic and concluded that around the world, employees worked as much as 47 minutes more per day than they did before the pandemic.[36] Other estimates have been even higher.[37] The hours available us to explore connections and activities that might provide some relief are virtually gone. Think of what has been lost to many of us simply by the new restrictions of the pandemic: watching and playing team sports, exercising in group settings, in person book clubs, church, and volunteer groups, high school reunions, family gathering, dinner parties. The list of what we can't do is large. And that, too, has taken a toll because for many of us, they are the easiest ways to find connections that help take us away from the stresses of our everyday lives.

We heard varied ways that relationships with others helped people to take a break from everyday stresses. Often, they involved being with people who are different from themselves or don't know a lot about what they do, such as a yoga trainer, friends in different industries, or even the dog. Time spent with family and truly being present was also important. One leader described his time traveling with his daughter 30-40 minutes to horseback riding lessons, talking the entire time about what was going on in her world. What all of these interactions have in common is the experience of engaging fully with others outside the sources of our stress, providing a mental and emotional break that lets us return to the adversities we face with renewed vigor.

EXERCISE: STRENGTHENING YOUR RESILIENCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Are your relationships broad and deep enough to help support you when setbacks hit? Here's an exercise to help you think this through.

STEP 1: Identify your top resilience needs.

In the chart below are the eight relational sources of resilience we previously described. Our research shows that these sources are not universally or equally important to everyone. For example, some people value laughter while others prefer empathy. In short, our resilience needs are personal and shaped by our unique history, personality, and professional/personal context. But collectively, the relationships we develop are a toolbox that we can turn to in our most difficult times and rely upon to help us navigate day-to-day life challenges.

Using the framework below, identify the top three sources of resilience that you would ***most like to strengthen in your life***. Place a checkmark by those that are most important for you to work on developing.

Framework for Building Resilience through Relationships

Place a check next to THREE relational sources of resilience you'd most like to strengthen		For each checkmark, identify strategies for building connection	
		Deepen existing relationships	Broaden with new people or groups
Connections that help to ***manage surges*** at work or at home	☐		
Connections that help us to ***make sense*** of people or politics	☐		
Connections that help us see a ***path forward***	☐		
Connections that provide ***empathic support*** so we can release emotions and stay balanced	☐		
Connections that give us ***perspective*** when setbacks happen	☐		
Connections that help us to ***laugh*** at ourselves and the situation	☐		
Connections that remind us of the ***purpose or meaning*** in our lives	☐		
Connections that enable us to ***unplug and take a break*** from challenges	☐		

STEP 2: Plan how to strengthen your network.

Reflecting on the top three resilience needs you indicated, place names of people or groups that you could invest in to further cultivate sources of resilience.

Connections that yield resilience can be intentionally cultivated in two ways. First, we can deepen existing relationships by, for example, exploring non-work interests with a teammate, or strengthening mutually beneficial relationships with influential work colleagues that help us when we need to see a path forward or make sense of people or politics. Second, we can initiate engagement with new groups or people to cultivate important elements of resilience—for example spiritual groups that remind us of purpose or affinity groups that allow us to laugh. Broadening our network helps us develop dimensionality in our lives—a rich variety of relationships and connections—that provide perspective on our struggles, offer us a stronger sense of purpose or just let us unplug from day-to-day struggles.

These groups may come from any and all walks of life—athletic pursuits, spiritual associations, nonprofit board work, community organizing groups around social, environmental, or political issues, etc. Engaging in non-work groups (particularly board work, social action, and community organizing groups) helps us develop resilience in our work life as well. Exposure to a diverse group of people allows us to learn different ways of managing, leading, and handling crises, helps us develop different relational skills such as negotiating with various stakeholders, and cultivates empathy and perspective that we carry back into our work, among other benefits. In summary, meaningful investment in non-work relationships broadens the toolkit one can rely upon to manage setbacks when they arise.

EXAMPLE: Building a network for the challenges of success

Andrew, an IT expert, had spent most of his career as an individual contributor and was used to solving his own problems. But as his responsibilities grew and the problems posed by his work became more complex, Andrew found himself increasingly stuck. It felt like a blow to his ego that he couldn't solve things himself. And the problems weren't just technical, now they involved making sense of people and politics. Most recently, he was facing a political quagmire in which different IT heads were arguing for different standards—and none of them agreed with him. At times, he felt like he just wanted to chuck the whole thing and go back to programming.

Looking at the framework for building resilience through relationships, Andrew realized that he didn't have trusted relationships that he could call upon at work to help him make sense of the infighting. He had just never gotten that involved with other people and had kept his head down and solved his own problems. Andrew decided to change that. He was pretty good at solving technical problems and decided to connect with others by helping to solve theirs. He also decided to connect with peers in other divisions through the company-wide IT consortium. It was likely that some of them were facing similar challenges.

Andrew also felt like he just wanted to vent about some of the politics with people who would listen. His college buddies had always been a good sounding board but he had recently lost touch with them. Things were just too busy. He felt bad about it, but took a deep breath and decided to reach out and suggest a quarterly outing. Having that on the calendar would keep him committed and he wouldn't lose out on good times and relationships that were important to him. And finally, Andrew realized that he never gave himself an opportunity to unplug from the pressures of work. He loved getting outdoors and hiking so decided to join the local hiking club, where he knew a couple of his neighbors were involved. The neighbors had no interest in IT, which would be a welcome break from his daily grind. Strengthening his connections in these ways put Andrew in a better position to respond to the challenges he was facing as his career progressed.

Resilience is a Team Sport

As Michael, the anesthesiologist in our opening story, learned in what was unquestionably the toughest period of his entire career, resilience is a team sport. He relied heavily on relationships at work and at home to pull through the extraordinary stresses of the early days of COVID. But such a network won't materialize overnight. The bonds of trust and reliance we heard about in our interviews were often built over years. When our interviewees had someone to turn to in times of adversity, it was often because they had built those relationships well in advance. In addition, they often cultivated and maintained authentic connections that came from many parts of their lives—not only through work, but through athletic pursuits, volunteer work, civic or religious communities, book or dinner clubs, communities of parents met through their children, and so on. But how did they make it happen? **We found six key strategies that our interviewees used for building and maintaining networks that support resilience:**

1. Build traditions, not obligations
2. Make deliberate investments
3. Seek to give first
4. Find common pursuits with others
5. Work through adversity to build bonds
6. Connect through family roles

1 Build traditions, not obligations

The first step in building a network for resilience is to recognize and maintain the connections you already have. People we've known over the years are often the ones who understand us best and will be there for us when challenges arise. But it's easy to fall out of touch. Time flies by, and with it all our good intentions of getting together or chatting, while we wait for the perfect moment or the break in the action that never comes.

Many of our interviewees were able to maintain connection over the years by creating structured times when they were committed to getting together. Often, these became traditions and inviolable spaces for social connection, set aside even by people who seemingly had no time to spare. The traditions could be an annual cycling or backpacking trip, or getting together at a beach house one weekend in the summer. Or it could be a group call with college friends every two weeks or Friday happy hour on FaceTime.

One busy executive, Gail, described a group of friends who started out as colleagues at the same company, then ventured out to different firms, and after 12 years they still remained close. Their tradition was getting together the first Thursday of every month to see a play and go to dinner. "We don't let that slide. No. We look forward to it. We pick a play. We buy the tickets. We make sure that we get together even though sometimes after a busy day, you just want to go home and collapse." The friends end up talking about everything under the sun, and often get philosophical about their work life, personal life and aspirations. When Gail needs someone to vent to or perspective on a challenge at work, she has that group of friends to turn to.

It's helpful to think about your "legacy" networks, the people from various stages of your life such as your home town, college or prior jobs. One of our interviewees described how his family considers these relationships part of their "life backpack." Throughout your life, you are enriched from knowing certain people you meet, so you put them in your backpack and make sure you carry them with you and nurture those relationships. In times of adversity, those relationships sustain us.

Often, our interviewees spoke about a boss they had early in their career or the first person who hired them, reflecting on how important it turned out to be that they didn't let go of that relationship. As one senior manager explained, "We had so much trust between us. Whether it was something about work or I just needed perspective on 'How do I do this; have you been through this before? Can you help me get a different perspective?'" Over time, her old boss started coming to her for advice as well and the relationship continued to strengthen.

Another interviewee described how she stays in touch with friends from her home town, having coffee once a month with high school and grammar school friends, some of whom go back as far as pre-K. They know her from "back when" and can help her to keep things in perspective. Whether from our school years, former workplaces, old neighborhoods, or teams or community groups we've worked with, these legacy networks can be there for us if we build in the structure to maintain them.

2 Make deliberate investments

We all face hurdles to connecting, the main one being demands on our time that often seem to leave no room for building relationships beyond the most essential ones for work and family. In addition to time constraints, our interviewees cited hurdles such as being too tired after work, being too introverted, being "not good at being social," or the difficulties of connecting virtually.

What often motivated people to persist despite the hurdles was a mindset that relationships are what endures in life, what gets us through the hard times and makes for a life worth living, and therefore worthy of deliberate investment of time and energy. In the words of one interviewee, "One day I may not have my job. I know that I'm dispensable. But my girlfriends, if I make sure that I feed those relationships, they will always be there." Not only does she ensure that she makes time to reach out and connect with these friends, when she's with them, she makes sure that she's authentically present—no checking work emails on her phone or otherwise multi-tasking.

One manager went so far as to move to a different city so he could be close to friends. He now has a strong support network, built with the ease of physical proximity. The move benefitted both him and his family, as these friends provide him with guidance on everything from raising kids to becoming successful in his career, and in times of stress, they help him to focus on his values and priorities.

Other interviewees described hesitancy to reach out, particularly to executives in the workplace, because of feeling intimidated or unsure of themselves, but forcing themselves to take steps nonetheless. The results were inevitably positive. As one manager said, "I'm an introvert, so doing that has been tougher for me, but I've forced myself to reach out and connect with different executives and develop relationships. When I go to headquarters, I get on people's calendars and they give me their time and grow to care about me. As a result, I've developed some nice relationships." The key in all these examples is the understanding that relationships will not simply form by themselves. It's only by taking deliberate action despite the hurdles that meaningful relations often get formed.

What would happen to your resilience if your relationships disappeared overnight?

Do a thought experiment with us for just a moment. Imagine that your most important relationships disappeared overnight. What would that do to your ability to handle adversity? In our interviews, people's first reaction to this question were statements like "I would be devastated," or "I wouldn't be able to function." More specifically, we heard these main impacts:

Without relationships to back them up, people would **lose the courage** to take risks or to lean into times of transition in their lives. According to one leader, "I wouldn't have direct reports." When she was first presented with the opportunity to manage a group, she was filled with doubt about her abilities. But her spouse said, "For sure you can do this easily." If he hadn't been there, she either wouldn't have taken the promotion or would have waited longer and missed the opportunity. Others described similarly how they wouldn't be in the positions they are as leaders because getting there required them to take risks, work through difficult learning stretches, or handle setbacks—and they wouldn't have handled these as well without their support systems.

Without other people to support us, it would be **harder to move on** from difficult experiences. The perspective we get from others helps us to chalk things up to experience and keep going. Or being able to vent lets us then move on to thinking about constructive solutions. One executive stated that without her relationships, "I probably would have left the organization. I wouldn't have made it through." Others described how if relationships disappeared they would have **nowhere to turn when they felt frustrated, confused, or vulnerable.** Leaders rising in the hierarchy often experience this when they realize they have an increasingly small sphere of people at their level with whom they can open up.

Other people described how they would have way more uncertainty without the people at home or at work who give them input or validate their thinking. One leader put it in the context that, **"a lot of resilience is being able to check the gauges."** It's like when you're driving, you casually check the speed and the gas level. You're looking at the gauges all the time. Similarly with resilience, checking in with people helps you know that you're on course. You can get a sense for whether your idea is a crazy one, and a quizzical look on someone's face is like the oil light coming on. Even a quick elevator conversation with someone who's been down a similar road can give you perspective or help validate that you're not the only one having difficulty. Without people to check in with, even casually, we become much more uncertain of how to respond to challenges.

Without relationships, people **lose the stability that grounds them** and helps them juggle all of life's demands. One leader described her relationships as the "pillars" that keep her home and work lives functioning. "I need all the pillars in place and if any one of them is shaken or disrupted, the whole model is unstable." These relationships help her to keep home stresses in check, especially when there's a surge, for example when a child is sick, and enable her to focus on the challenges at work when she is there. Others described how without the important relationships in their lives they wouldn't show up at work or really life in ways that make them successful or someone other people would want to engage with. "I think I would not be a very nice person…I would be more reactive to people and less engaged in life on my terms and doing a spectrum of meaningful things."

It may seem like a lot to invest in maintaining relationships, or that you're too busy in the moment so you put it off, but when you consider where you would be without them, the value of making the time is clear. In a concept known as "loss aversion", Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky tell us that the pain of losing something is twice as powerful as the thrill of gaining something.[38] Losing relationships you once counted on to help define who you are will take an enormous toll over time. Don't make the mistake of failing to maintain those that are truly valuable to you.

3 Seek to Give First

Especially for people who feel that they're not naturals at building relationships, finding ways to give can facilitate connecting with others. For example, one manager decided to volunteer with his local association of Asian Americans. He organized their annual Chinese New Year celebration and in the process worked hand-in-hand with teams of volunteers and staff members. Needing to rely on each other to get things done helped to build familiarity and trust, and ultimately, the crew became people he could rely on in other parts of his life as well. Helping others in workplace collaborations can function in the same way. As one executive described, "You sort of start with getting to know each other a little bit and what each person does, and you just make yourself available to them when they're trying to solve problems, helping them when they need help. In the end, you have a relationship."

Other ways of giving include talking up other people and giving credit where credit is due, and understanding what's important to other people and using your talents and resources to help them achieve it. Whether it's in the workplace, with relatives, or in community, religious or athletic groups, looking to give to others helps form the foundations of trust that give relationships their start.

4 Find Common Pursuits with Others

Another way to connect authentically with others is in contexts in which you share a common pursuit. For example, one leader we spoke with described how music has been a passion all her life. In her local church, she found a group of people who shared that passion, and she became very close with the church pianist. From there, the connections grew; she found a home for her faith, and she connected with other parents who shared tips about navigating the school system and raising teens. But it all started with following a pursuit that was integral to who she is—creating music.

Another executive, the head of a biology lab, felt driven to explore the frontiers of her scientific field. She published papers on her research findings and would go to meetings, give talks, and present. Traveling to the same couple of meetings each year, she found people who love to do the same things that she does. They go out for drinks and end up talking about not just work but their lives and personal challenges. The common pursuit of advancing their field unites them. At the same time, those contacts, coming from diverse institutions and geographic areas, add dimensionality to her life and offer her varied perspectives that are helpful when she is stumped and needs to find a path forward. Whether you have interests in science, music, athletics, social justice, fishing, or book reading, connecting with others who feel likewise is a way to help build networks that support resilience.

5 Work through adversity to build bonds

Often, strong interpersonal bonds are forged in the crucible of adversity. We found two types of these "crucible moments." One is when it's two of you or a group facing a common threat or adversity together. It could be a new accounting system that you're all struggling with, a set of near-impossible deadlines you have to meet, a leadership transformation that has everyone reeling, or any kind of significant challenge that you face together and somehow come through to the other side. One physician compared the bonds formed while working together against COVID to the comradeship among soldiers, "because you're all exhausted and you work 24 hours a day and it's like going through a war together." These strength of these bonds become an ongoing source of resilience.

The second type of crucible moment happens when you're in conflict with another person but you're are able to work through it and gain each other's respect. One leader described the friction she had with a colleague in another unit. There was no trust and whenever they met, she had her guard up. But they would get to spots where they disagreed and would argue, and at the end of it, the colleague would crack a joke or say something like, "Well, that sucked." And they both would laugh. Interjecting humor kept the conflict they had over ideas or methods from becoming personalized, and helped them to recognize that if the discussion gets heated, it's because they both care. In this way, they went through a hard time with a relationship that could have become negative, but instead became a powerful source of future resilience.

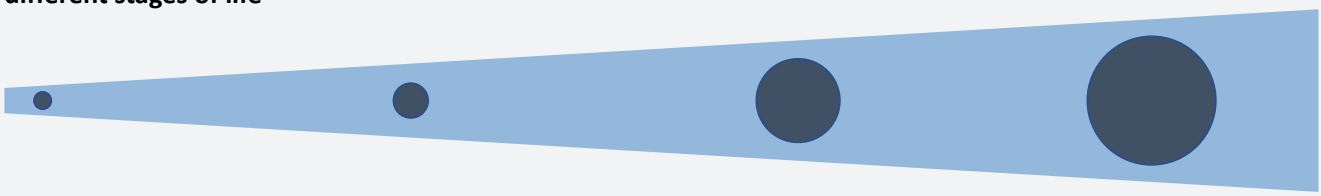
6 Connect through family roles

The social or community roles we fulfill as a spouse, partner, or parent can often become a source of meaningful relationships. We consistently heard about valued relationships or perspectives that were gained from trips with a spouse's college friends, going along for volunteer activities, or becoming involved with the communities around kids' athletics or school activities. For example, one executive described how he tends to be focused on work and is not a natural for volunteering in the community—but his partner is. He's very connected with local charities and brings him along, with the result that he has expanded his horizons to people he never would otherwise have encountered. His connections with them help create greater perspective and appreciation for where he is, and help to center him when things feel out of control.

INVESTING OVER TIME BUILDS A NETWORK FOR RESILIENCE

If you're finding yourself struggling to find a spare minute to even think about reaching out to connections that will help you build resilience, think about what is at stake if you don't. You can soldier on trying to tap into your inner grit in tough times. But you don't have to. You can actively seek and maintain the connections that will help you build resilience in small ways that add up over time.

JESSE built a network for resilience by deliberately investing in connections and maintaining them throughout different stages of life



Hometown

Maintains friends as far back as grammar school who are different from her in many ways but can still make her laugh and will always listen without judging.

College and grad school

Ensures she schedules 2-3 events a year to stay in touch. College friends give perspective (keep her from taking herself too seriously) and remind her of her higher aspirations.

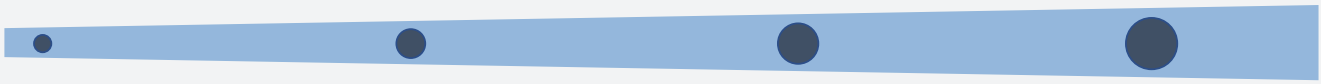
Early career and adult life

Reaches out to former bosses with interesting articles or offers of help. They in turn are there for her when she needs someone to help her make sense of people or politics, or to figure out a path forward.

Current career and home

Connects locally outside of work through running club. Friendships there help her manage surges at home and help unplug from roles as professional and mother.

BLAIR lost touch with early connections and relies heavily on her spouse and current peers at work.



Hometown

Moved away and feels she has little left in common.

College and grad school

Feels she is too busy to take time off for trips or calls with college friends.

Early career and adult life

Ends up burning bridges when she leaves employers.

Current career and home

Relies on spouse for empathic support and often gets overwhelmed when she hits a surge like the kids getting sick.

Conclusion

The lessons of how our relationships build resilience bear emphasizing today as COVID has created a significant challenge for us all. The importance of building and maintaining our connections has never been clearer. For most of us, the challenges and setbacks we are experiencing in work and life during this pandemic have been relentless. But you're not alone in this battle. Start by understanding the critical importance of building, maintaining, and tapping a diverse network to help you ride out the storm.

References

1. Warner R, April K. Building Personal Resilience at Work. 2012;(4):16.
2. Chandola T, Brunner E, Marmot M. Chronic stress at work and the metabolic syndrome: prospective study. *BMJ*. 2006;332(7540):521-525. doi:10.1136/bmj.38693.435301.80
3. Torpy JM, Lynm C, Glass RM. Chronic Stress and the Heart. *JAMA*. 2007;298(14):1722-1722. doi:10.1001/jama.298.14.1722
4. van Praag HM. Can stress cause depression? *Prog Neuropsychopharmacol Biol Psychiatry*. 2004;28(5):891-907. doi:10.1016/j.pnpbp.2004.05.031
5. Melchior M, Caspi A, Milne BJ, Danese A, Poulton R, Moffitt TE. Work stress precipitates depression and anxiety in young, working women and men. *Psychol Med*. 2007;37(8):1119-1129. doi:10.1017/S0033291707000414
6. Kašpárková L, Vaculík M, Procházka J, Schaufeli WB. Why resilient workers perform better: The roles of job satisfaction and work engagement. *J Workplace Behav Health*. 2018;33(1):43-62. doi:10.1080/15555240.2018.1441719
7. The Resiliency Advantage: Master Change, Thrive Under Pressure, and Bounce Back from Setbacks: Al Siebert: 9781576753293: Amazon.com: Books. Accessed March 19, 2021. https://www.amazon.com/Resiliency-Advantage-Master-Pressure-Setbacks/dp/1576753298
8. Polat DD, İskender M. Exploring Teachers' Resilience in Relation to Job Satisfaction, Burnout, Organizational Commitment and Perception of Organizational Climate. *Int J Psychol Educ Stud*. 2018;5(3):1-13. doi:10.17220/ijpes.2018.03.001
9. Shatté A, Perlman A, Smith B, Lynch WD. The Positive Effect of Resilience on Stress and Business Outcomes in Difficult Work Environments. *J Occup Environ Med*. 2017;59(2):135-140. doi:10.1097/JOM.0000000000000914
10. Fredrickson BL. The role of positive emotions in positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *Am Psychol*. 2001;56(3):218-226. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.56.3.218
11. Brooks R, Goldstein S. *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*. 1st edition. McGraw-Hill Education; 2004.
12. Brown R, Wey H, Foland K. The Relationship Among Change Fatigue, Resilience, and Job Satisfaction of Hospital Staff Nurses. *J Nurs Scholarsh*. 2018;50(3):306-313. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/jnu.12373
13. Zheng Z, Gangaram P, Xie H, Chua S, Ong SBC, Koh SE. Job satisfaction and resilience in psychiatric nurses: A study at the Institute of Mental Health, Singapore. *Int J Ment Health Nurs*. 2017;26(6):612-619. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12286
14. Gorelick C, April K, Milton N. Performance Through Learning: Knowledge Management in Practice. *Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann*. Accessed March 19, 2021. https://www.academia.edu/41380293/Performance_Through_Learning_Knowledge_Management_in_Practice
15. Maddi SR, Khoshaba DM. *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws at You*. Special edition. AMACOM; 2005.
16. Reivich K, Shatté A. *The Resilience Factor: 7 Essential Skills for Overcoming Life's Inevitable Obstacles*. Broadway Books; 2002:342.
17. Zeng Y, Shen K. Resilience Significantly Contributes to Exceptional Longevity. *Curr Gerontol Geriatr Res*. 2010;2010:e525693. doi:10.1155/2010/525693
18. Fry PS, Keyes CLM. *New Frontiers in Resilient Aging: Life-Strengths and Well-Being in Late Life*. Cambridge University Press; 2010.
19. Aboalshamat KT, Alsiyud AO, Al-Sayed RA, Alreddadi RS, Faqiehi SS, Almehmadi SA. The Relationship between Resilience, Happiness, and Life Satisfaction in Dental and Medical Students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. *Niger J Clin Pract*. 2018;21(8):1038-1043. doi:10.4314/njcp.v21i8
20. Smith JL, Hollinger-Smith L. Savoring, resilience, and psychological well-being in older adults. *Aging Ment Health*. 2015;19(3):192-200. doi:10.1080/13607863.2014.986647
21. Bradley JM, Hojjat M. A model of resilience and marital satisfaction. *J Soc Psychol*. 2017;157(5):588-601. doi:10.1080/00224545.2016.1254592
22. Bonanno GA, Wortman CB, Lehman DR, et al. Resilience to loss and chronic grief: A prospective study from preloss to 18-months postloss. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2002;83(5):1150-1164. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.83.5.1150
23. Tugade M, Fredrickson B. Resilient Individuals Use Positive Emotions to Bounce Back From Negative Emotional Experiences. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2004;86:320-333. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320
24. Cross R, Singer J, Dillon K. Don't Let Micro-Stresses Burn You Out. *Harv Bus Rev*. Published online July 9, 2020. Accessed April 10, 2021. https://hbr.org/2020/07/dont-let-micro-stresses-burn-you-out
25. Gibson JM. Psychologists agree: Laughter has 4 powerful effects on well-being. Inverse. Accessed March 25, 2021. https://www.inverse.com/mind-body/laughing-is-good-for-your-mind-your-body-heres-what-the-research-shows
26. Lurie A, Monahan K. Humor, Aging, and Life Review: Survival Through the Use of Humor. *Soc Work Ment Health*. 2015;13(1):82-91. doi:10.1080/15332985.2014.884519
27. Gonot-Schoupinsky FN, Garip G. Laughter and humour interventions for well-being in older adults: A systematic review and intervention classification. *Complement Ther Med*. 2018;38:85-91. doi:10.1016/j.ctim.2018.04.009
28. McGhee PE, McGhee PE. *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Kendall/Hunt Pub.; 1999.
29. Nilsen DLF, Nilsen AP. *The Language of Humor: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press; 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108241403
30. Li F, Chen J, Yu L, et al. The Role of Stress Management in the Relationship between Purpose in Life and Self-Rated Health in Teachers: A Mediation Analysis. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2016;13(7). doi:10.3390/ijerph13070719
31. Isaacs K, Mota NP, Tsai J, et al. Psychological resilience in U.S. military veterans: A 2-year, nationally representative prospective cohort study. *J Psychiatr Res*. 2017;84:301-309. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2016.10.017
32. Schaefer SM, Boylan JM, Reekum CM van, et al. Purpose in Life Predicts Better Emotional Recovery from Negative Stimuli. *PLOS ONE*. 2013;8(11):e80329. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0080329
33. Taylor S. Building your resilience and understanding your purpose. SmartCompany. Published October 9, 2017. Accessed March 26, 2021. https://www.smartcompany.com.au/people-human-resources/wellbeing/building-resilience-understanding-purpose/
34. Cross R, Singer J, Dillon K. Findging Purpose: How connections with others create meaning in our everyday work and life. Published online 2021:22.
35. Packer J. Taking a break: Exploring the restorative benefits of short breaks and vacations. *Ann Tour Res Empir Insights*. 2021;2(1):100006. doi:10.1016/j.annale.2020.100006
36. Proof the workday is longer since COVID. Work Life by Atlassian. Published November 5, 2020. Accessed April 22, 2021. https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/data-analysis-length-of-workday-COVID
37. Business JG CNN. People are working longer hours at home than they did in the office. CNN. Accessed April 22, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/05/business/working-from-home-hours-pandemic-scli-intl-gbr/index.html
38. Schittenhelm C. What Is Loss Aversion? Scientific American. doi:10.1038/scientificamericanmind0716-72b