

# Resilience And Optimism: The Best Way To Manage Stress And Beat Burnout (And Pandemic Fatigue, Too)

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*Breathe. Choose.*

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Stress comes in many sizes and shapes. Acute stress is the response to an immediate threat or challenge. If we are resilient and manage it correctly, such stress can be energizing and help us discover new strengths.

Stress is unhealthy when it becomes chronic. Chronic stress can stem from acute stress (when we do not manage it well or fail to allow ourselves adequate time to recover). But more often, chronic stress is the long-term (greater than six months) result of everyday stresses that build up and accumulate over time, leading to burnout

Stress Management Month is a good time for business leaders to take stock of how stress has taken a toll on their employees and organization. The pandemic has delivered a toxic cocktail of stress in all its incarnations. We have experienced immediate shocks to the system that have turned our lives upside down. And we have weathered the long grind of restrictions, lockdowns, and ongoing uncertainty. The challenge going forward is not just to manage stress and beat burnout through increased resilience—but to cultivate the antidote to stress and the exhaustion it produces: hope and optimism for the future.

## Exhaustion and GAS

One way to better understand the lingering effects of the pandemic is by looking at the research on GAS, or General Adaptation Syndrome. Acute stress is typically a short-term reaction to a specific, intense event. But what happens when the ripple effects of that event play out over months or even years?

The short answer: exhaustion sets in, and we burn out. Our fight-or-flight response to a crisis or threat provides a burst of energy (the alarm stage) that is short-lived but which powers us through the process (the resistance stage) of adapting to our new reality. Yet prolonged exposure to a stressful situation eventually drains our resources, and we end up at the exhaustion stage.

Early in the pandemic, the ADP Research Institute's [Global Workplace Study](#) found that employee engagement held steady despite heightened stress and uncertainty. The Covid impact on a particular country did not affect workplace resilience. If anything, the process of being tested seemed to spark resilience. Workplaces that experienced the greatest disruption showed the highest resilience.

If we think of resilience like a muscle, it makes sense that more significant disruption resulted in higher resilience. Greater disruption also removed the illusion that we were going back to “normal” anytime soon. Although we commonly think of resilience as bouncing back, it is, in fact, more about bouncing forward. True resilience is about allowing ourselves to become changed and to grow stronger in broken places. When we accept that our reality has changed and that we must adapt, we are ready to build toward a new normal rather than holding out hope of returning to the old normal.

## **How resilience and optimism complement one another**

The will to move forward with hope to a new reality—all while accepting the current reality—is what psychologists call bounded optimism. According to a [McKinsey report](#) on overcoming pandemic fatigue in the workplace, bounded optimism is the key to reenergizing organizations and renewing resilience.

The McKinsey report charts a “post-crisis response” arc similar to that observed in General Adaptation Syndrome. The way to break the downward slope at the end of that arc, leading to exhaustion and disillusionment, is leadership that displays “inspiration, hope, and optimism that’s tempered by reality.”

Linking resilience and optimism is not a new idea. Numerous studies have found that the two, while independent qualities, complement and can reinforce one another. And Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, placed optimism at the very center of his [model of resilience](#).

## **Reenergizing your organization**

It is not enough to project hope and optimism. The McKinsey report suggests some specific leadership practices to “reenergize organizations for the long run”—and these recommendations echo much of the work I do with my executive coaching clients:

Create a culture of care, connection, and well-being. The need for a more human-centered approach to leadership has been evident for some time, and the pandemic has driven home this need even more. Organizations that do not value employees as their most important resource will lose their best talent. Practice deep listening, and be on the alert for signs of exhaustion and stress.

Be clear about purpose and priorities. Many who have left their job during The Great Resignation cite a lack of organizational purpose as one reason for doing so. Purpose

energizes and inspires. It also helps us set priorities. Unmanageable workloads are a significant drain on employee energy and morale. Overwork and burnout were problems before and [got worse during the pandemic](#). Allow employees to focus on the work that matters most.

Teach (and practice) adaptability. McKinsey writes that “much about adaptability and resilience is malleable—that is, they can be taught.” Learning adaptability starts with adopting a growth mindset and viewing a challenge or crisis as an opportunity to grow and change. Leaders can model adaptability by actively engaging employees in a dialogue about how to create a better workplace.

It is critical to learn how to manage stress and beat burnout, but we must seek to do more, especially in times of significant change. By letting go of the desire to return to the old normal, we can focus on working toward a better new normal. By embracing bounded optimism, we can focus less on what has been lost and more on the possibility before us. Instilling this mindset in ourselves as leaders and in our organizational cultures will help build resilience as we face a future with many unknowns and many challenges ahead.