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Emotional Intelligence

The Secret to Building Resilience

by Rob Cross, Karen Dillon, and Danna Greenberg

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Jorg Greuel/ Getty Images

Summary. The ability to bounce back from setbacks is often described as the difference between successful and unsuccessful people. Resilience has been shown to positively influence work satisfaction and engagement, as well as overall well-being, and can lower depression levels. But resilience isn't just a kind of solitary internal "grit" that allows us to bounce back. New research shows that resilience is also heavily enabled by strong relationships and networks. We can nurture and build our resilience through a wide variety of interactions with people in our personal and professional lives. These interactions can help us to alter the magnitude of the challenge we're facing. They can help crystalize the meaningful purpose in what we are doing or help us see a path forward to overcome a setback — these are the kinds of interactions that motivate us to persist. Are your relationships broad and deep enough to help support you when you hit setbacks? Here's an exercise to help you think that through. [close](#)

An anesthesiologist we'll call Jacob used to describe his job as "90% boredom, 10% horror." With a few exceptions of challenging surgeries and managing a department of several hundred physicians and nurses, most of the time, Jacob's role was routine. But that was before the Covid-19 pandemic. Since anesthesiology is not a specialty that can resort to remote "telemedicine," Jacob 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, not even really knowing how many of them might 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, Jacob 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 Jacob was, too.

But Jacob didn’t break. He and his team have held together as they continued to do their work throughout the pandemic. So what allowed Jacob to endure this period of extraordinary stress? Resilience.

The ability to bounce back from setbacks is often described as the difference between successful and unsuccessful people. Resilience has been shown to positively influence work satisfaction and engagement, as well as overall well-being, and can lower depression levels. There is even evidence that resilience can help protect us from physical illness. But resilience, conventional thinking assumes, is something we find within ourselves only when we are tested — a kind of solitary internal “grit” that allows those of us who are strong to bounce back.

But that’s not necessarily true. Our research (which is not yet published) shows that resilience is not purely an individual characteristic, but is also heavily enabled by strong relationships and networks. We can nurture and build our resilience through a wide variety of interactions with people in our personal and professional lives. These interactions can help us to shift or push back on work demands and alter the magnitude of the challenge we’re facing. They can help crystalize the meaningful purpose in

what we are doing or help us see a path forward to overcome a setback — these are the kinds of interactions that motivate us to persist. People in our support systems can provide empathy or simply help us laugh and bolster our resilience by shifting perspective and reminding us we are not alone in the fight. In short, resilience is not something we need to find deep down inside ourselves: we can actually become more resilient in the process of connecting with others in our most challenging times.

Based on in-depth interviews with 150 leaders (five men and five women from 15 different organizations who were considered to be among their “most successful” leaders), we have defined how connections can help us become more resilient when we encounter major life or professional challenges. A well-developed network of relationships can help us rebound from setbacks by:

- Helping us *shift work or manage surges*
- Helping us to *make sense of people or politics in a given situation*
- Helping us find the confidence to *push back* and *self advocate*
- Helping us see *a path forward*
- Providing *empathic support so we can release negative emotions*

- Helping us to *laugh at ourselves and the situation*
- Reminding us of the *purpose or meaning* in our work
- Broadening us as individuals so that we maintain *perspective* when setbacks happen

As Jacob (who was among those we interviewed) learned in what was unquestionably the toughest period of his entire career, resilience is a team sport.

While, clearly, a portion of Jacob's fortitude came from personal strength, our discussion with him revealed a number of ways that relationships bolstered his resilience. A patchwork of different people in his network collectively played a critical role in helping Jacob 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 and validation, boosting Jacob's 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 was able 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 over-run." And a very strong chief of staff

stepped in and took ownership of several work-streams put in place to help deal with Covid. For Jacob, 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 — 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 on the same team,” he recalled.

Jacob was also lucky in that his home was a critical 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.”

In short, Jacob shows us that resilience is found not just in having a network of supporters, but in truly connecting with them when you need them most. It’s in the *actual interactions themselves* — the conversations that validate your plans, reframe your perspective on a situation, help you laugh and feel authentic with others, or just encourage you to get back up and try again because the battle is a worthy one — 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 — if we are building these relationships in the right way as we progress through our careers. Relationships may be our most undervalued resources.

But such a network won't materialize overnight. When we talk to people who have shown exceptional resilience, it's clear that they often have cultivated and maintained authentic connections that come from many parts of their life — not only through work, but through athletic pursuits, volunteer work, civic or religious communities, book or dinner clubs, communities of parents they've met through their children, and so on. Interactions in these spheres provide critical “dimensionality”, broadening their identity and “opening the aperture” on how they look at their lives. We become more (or less) resilient through our interactions with others.

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

Step 1: Identify your top resilience needs.

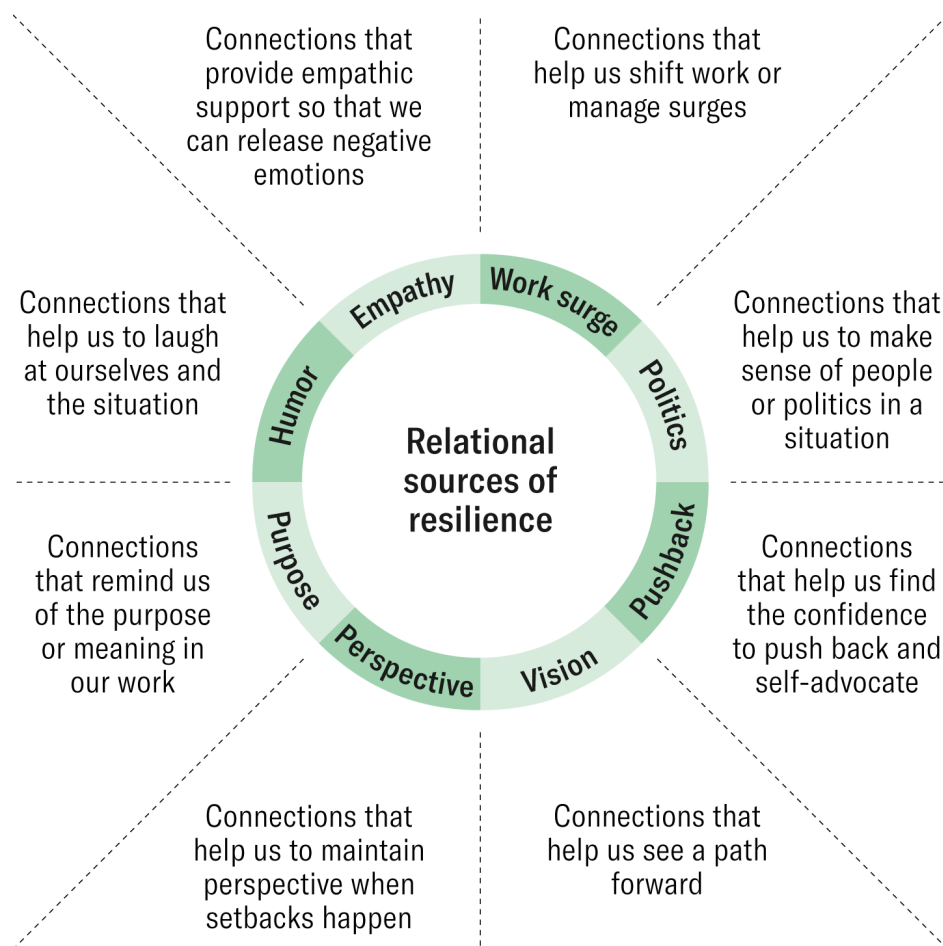
Below are eight common relational sources of resilience, the same ones we noted above. Our research shows that these sources are not universally or equally important to everyone. For example, some people value laughter, while others prefer empathy. In short, our resilience needs are personal and are 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, which we can 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***. Make a note of those that are most important for you to work on developing.

What Are Your Top Relational Sources of Resilience?

A well-developed network of relationships can help you rebound from setbacks. Identify the spheres that are most important to you. Are you falling short in some categories?



Source: Rob Cross, Karen Dillon, and Danna Greenberg



Step 2: Plan how to expand your network.

Reflecting on the top three resilience needs you indicated, place the 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 broaden existing relationships by, for example, exploring non-work interests with a teammate or strengthening mutually beneficial relationships with influential work colleagues that help us push back. Second, we can initiate engagement with new groups or people to cultivate important elements of resilience — for example spiritual groups that remind us of our 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 help us grow, that can provide perspective on our struggles, and that can offer us a stronger sense of purpose.

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 nonwork 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, and helps us develop different relational skills such as negotiating with various stakeholders. It also helps us cultivate 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.

One critical insight from our interviews is that relying on your network in times of transition matters a great deal. When people told us stories of significant transitions — moves, job losses, role expansions, or family changes — they tended to separate into one of two groups. One group tended to lean into the transition and relied on existing relationships to work through the ambiguity and anxiety they were experiencing. This group also used the transition to reach out to one or two new groups such as a working parents group, a newcomers group, or a work-based coaching circle. In contrast, the second group operated with a mindset that they just needed to absorb the transition and closed in on their circle. They felt overwhelmed and said they would lean into activities when they had time in the future. Over the ensuing 18 months, this group became a smaller version of themselves and often drifted away from the connections that had been so important to their lives.

Covid has created a significant transition for us all. The importance of building and maintaining your 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. You can build resilience. Start by understanding the critical importance of growing, maintaining, and tapping a diverse network to help you ride out the storm.

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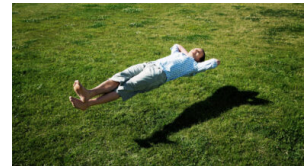
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