

How to Bounce Back

Living with a disability can be stressful at times. Resilience is a term that describes how we cope with stress. By building up our resilience, we can stay more engaged in life.

What Is Resilience?

Resilience describes our ability to bounce back and keep going after a stressful experience. Different people define resilience in different ways. When we asked people with disabilities to describe resilience in their own words, some descriptions included:

- Bouncing back, or being “buoyant.”
- “Rolling with” or “dancing with” a disability.
- Taking things one day at a time, while also planning for the future.
- Finding a “new normal” as life changes.
- Making the best of life with a disability.
- Trusting that stressful times will pass, like the weather.

How Do People Cope with Disabilities as They Age?

Living with a long-term disability can be stressful. Progressive conditions, like muscular dystrophy (MD) or multiple

sclerosis (MS), can cause unpredictable physical changes but everyone has changes associated with aging.

Managing a disability may be more stressful during some life stages than others. For example, during mid-life, it can be especially challenging to manage health changes while you are also working, taking care of children or planning for retirement. As you get older, symptoms like pain or fatigue may get worse or harder to manage, causing additional stress.

Different people react differently to the stresses of having a long-term disability over time:

- Some people experience emotional problems, such as depression or anxiety, which persist or get worse over time.
- Some people experience recurring ups and downs in their mood, depending on what is happening with their health or lives. For example, they may feel depressed after experiencing a relapse, a worsening of symptoms, or loss of employment.
- Sometimes a person’s mood declines for a few months or years after developing a physical disability. As time passes, they bounce back, and return to the level of happiness they enjoyed before the disability.

- Notably, many people report having stable moods and continuing to function well even after experiencing disability-related stresses. In some studies, at least half of the participants never experienced any emotional problems after developing a long-term disability. Instead, they consistently reported positive moods over time. Some people even reported that the disability helped them to grow and lead better, happier lives. Several researchers have described this as a “resilient” pattern of responding to a disability.

What Makes Us Resilient?

When people are resilient, they show some patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that help them cope well with stress such as:

- **Flexible thinking:** Seeing more than one way to solve a problem, or seeing a problem in a humorous light. Seeing problems as temporary or limited.
- **Challenge thinking:** Seeing a stressful situation as a challenge to be accepted and mastered, rather than as an insurmountable threat.
- **Problem-solving:** Coping by finding solutions to problems, rather than focusing attention on negative feelings.
- **Perceived control:** Feeling able to control a stressful situation. Sometimes people reflect on how they coped with previous stressful experiences to develop this sense of control.

- **Making meaning:** Seeing meaning, benefit, or growth in the stressful experience.
- **Optimism:** Seeing the “glass as half full” and expecting good things to happen.
- **Positive feelings:** Focusing on positive feelings and reactions, such as hope, humor, and gratitude, instead of negative ones.
- **Mindfulness:** Being aware of thoughts and feelings without judging them.
- **Social connections:** Having a strong, supportive social network.

How Can You Build up your Resilience?

You can build up your resilience by:

Living a Meaningful Life

When you focus on things that give your life meaning and purpose, it can help you respond better to stressful situations. Some ways to cultivate a sense of meaning in your life include:

- Spending time with close family members and friends.
- Developing a hobby, such as drawing or painting, making music, gardening, knitting, or woodworking.
- Participating in a religious or spiritual practice.
- Working can add meaning to your life, if you are able to.

- Volunteering in the community. For some, helping others brings a strong sense of meaning and purpose.

Finding Social Support

Being part of a community is helpful during stressful times. Here are some ways to strengthen your social support network:

- Make a point to regularly keep in touch with friends and family.
- Consider joining local community groups, such as church or other religious groups, book clubs, or hobby groups.
- Meeting others with the same disability condition may be a source of support. National organizations which might have a local support group in your area include:
 - ◆ [United Spinal Association](#)
 - ◆ [Muscular Dystrophy Association](#)
 - ◆ [National Multiple Sclerosis Society](#)
 - ◆ [Post-Polio Health International](#)
- You may also be able to connect with people through your local center for independent living.

Learning to Manage Your Feelings

When we are stressed, it is natural to experience negative feelings. However, cultivating more positive emotions can help us bounce back. Some ways to do this include:

- Practice mindfulness meditation. Some

free resources are available at the [UCLA Mindfulness Research Center](#).

- Spend a few moments each day reflecting on what you are most grateful for. It may be helpful to write down a list.
- Use of humor, such as watching a funny television show, can be a great way to let go of stress.
- A professional counselor may help you overcome particularly troublesome thoughts and feelings.

Taking Care of Your Health

Managing your physical wellness is another important aspect of resilience. Some ways to maximize your physical health include:

- Stay physically active. For advice on exercising with a physical disability, see our fact sheet on exercise.
- Managing your energy can help you cope with fatigue. Pace yourself and take breaks when needed, and try to get enough sleep each night.
- Be mindful of your diet and practice healthy eating habits.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about managing bothersome symptoms, such as pain.

Additional Resources

- Authentic Happiness, Positive Psychology Center: www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu
- Vital Aging Network: www.vital-aging-network.org
- National Center on Physical Activity and Disability: www.nchpad.org
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center: marc.ucla.edu

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