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CHAPTER

# 1

## Focus on what you want

# How to make what's important to you move to the centre of your life and how to use it to boost your resilience

There are some fantastic books on resilience and a number of trainers delivering pretty good courses. We have been to a fair few of them and it is likely that some of you have too. So why is this different?

Well, as you know from the introductory chapter, CBT is all about beliefs. The things that we believe in are vitally important to our sense of self and our understanding of who we are. All too many of us, however, go about our daily lives virtually ignoring the beliefs that shape and define us. So many people say that x (music, philanthropy, justice, any number of things) is massively important to them, and yet x plays little or no part in their life. It is a clear case of self-neglect! Not only that, but, if you are trying to pursue goals that are at odds with these beliefs, they are likely to have become invisible obstacles tugging you back when you are trying so hard to move forwards. In short, they will be making it inevitable that you are getting in your own way.

They will also be undermining your resilience. By the end of this book, you will have become aware of many of your unhelpful beliefs and, of course, a few helpful ones too, which is a bonus. You will have refocused the unhelpful beliefs to be more helpful or ditched them if you do not need them. As a result, your level of resilience will have increased manifold. Sounds like dark and dangerous work? Well, the great news is that it's not.

## What do we mean by resilience?

So, let's make sure we are all on the same page. What do you we mean by resilience? In our society it's a quality that is pretty much universally admired, but often we have quite different versions of it in our wonderfully uniquely constructed minds.

**Exercise 1.1: Resilience Award**

We said that Mind Fitness is a programme that makes full use of the imagination, We would like you to take a piece of paper or your mindfulness notebook, if you've had time to buy one, and close your eyes. We want you to decide who you would nominate for a Resilience Award. It can be a famous person, someone known for their courage or endurance, but also it can be your friend or your mum. Anyone at all. Now have two minutes to think about what it is about them, or the actions they have taken, that gives them extreme resilience, as you have defined it in your mind. Jot down a few notes.

Now have a look at your notes and see what qualities you have identified as most important. Often people choose individuals who have gone through extreme adversity and come through it with increased strength. Some of the words and phrases commonly used are:

- ▶ Endurance
- ▶ Bravery
- ▶ Resolve
- ▶ Determination
- ▶ Spirit
- ▶ Bouncing back

Let's take a moment to consider why we need this resilience. What does it give us that enables us to survive – no, better, to thrive? It is generally accepted that we need resilience to:

- ▶ Control pressure
- ▶ Better manage anxiety
- ▶ Reduce the risk of suffering chronic long-term stress
- ▶ Strengthen emotional intelligence
- ▶ Have a greater sense of wellbeing
- ▶ Manage challenging relationships
- ▶ Improve performance and productivity
- ▶ Be able to adapt to change
- ▶ Be able to confront adversity

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Somewhere in there is probably the reason why you bought this book, so resilience is obviously very important. Resilience to what? When do we need to use this resilience? Take a minute after each of the following to consider how you might have shown resilience or lack of it in each of these scenarios:

- ▶ A big event (for example a wedding, divorce, house move, bereavement)
- ▶ A minor event or series of events that seemed challenging (for example late trains, lost keys, a financial loss)
- ▶ Ongoing adversity (for example long-term illness of yourself or a loved one)
- ▶ Day-to-day annoyances that tend to trip us up

Try to be specific and identify an actual scenario – something with which you have had to contend.

Considering your answers, take a moment to think about how resilient you would say that you are now, so that you have something to compare it with at the end of this book. Score yourself out of 10. Of course, most of us are more resilient in some situations than others. We all know someone who is ferociously able to cope in the working environment but falls to pieces in a home situation. And the reverse. This will be linked to where they place the meaning in their life, which we will come back to later.

## What does a resilient response to a situation look like?

Next we're going to do a quick exercise to think about how we behave when we are feeling resilient (or not) – how resilience expresses itself in everyday life.

Is resilience really something you can develop? Yes absolutely.

### **Exercise 1.2: Respond with Resilience**

Write out three simple situations from your work or home life that would require resilience.

Then give a non-resilient and a resilient response to each of the situations.

For example:

Your boss was supposed to give a talk this afternoon but she has gone home ill and, on her way out, told you that you would have to cover.

**Non-resilient response** – There is no way I can do it! I don't know enough! I will make a fool of myself!

**Resilient response** – Well it could be a great opportunity if I do it well. I know most of it and I have a couple of hours to prepare.

1 Situation:

Non-resilient response:

Resilient response:

2 Situation:

Non-resilient response:

Resilient response:

3 Situation:

Non-resilient response:

Resilient response:

Is resilience really something you can develop? Yes absolutely.

## What underpins and powers our resilience?

People used to think that resilience is something we are born with, that we either have or don't. But since we have known about neuroplasticity (which we will be looking at in Chapter 3), we know that we can change the way our brain works and this includes developing and strengthening resilience.

The way we respond to an event or situation depends on our beliefs and attitudes and the meaning that we attach to them. This is why a group of people will respond to the same event in any number of different ways. This is a key concept that we will revisit several times in the book. Think of a situation such as a mass redundancy. One person might see the redundancy as an absolute disaster. To another it might be a bump in the road, even an opportunity.

It is interesting when we look at figures who have shown this resilience, this invincibility, that, in very many cases, there is a deep meaning at their core.

They have something so strong that they believe in, that has literally powered them through the darkest of situations. I (BW) had the honour of meeting Terry Waite, who was held as a hostage for four years in the Lebanon. This meaning that had 'helped him through' was almost palpable. When I met him in 2012, he had just returned to Beirut to be reconciled with his captors.

Perhaps the most extreme case of this is that of Viktor Frankl who wrote the seminal book on resilience *Man's Search for Meaning* after being a prisoner in Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup> If resilience is something you want to focus on, you can do no better than read this. Actually everyone should read this; we all need good regular doses of inspiration.

Thankfully, most of us do not undergo traumas on such a monumental scale, but the same principle applies. If you can identify what is most important to you and bring it to the centre of your life, then everything else begins to fall into place around it. And when we say what is most important to you, we mean important to you now – not when you last thought about it which may be way back in the mists of time. We trained a lovely and extremely clever woman whose face fell as she reeled off her beliefs. It started with passion and ended in absolute confusion as she realised she had stated this list of beliefs to a lecturer at university whom she wanted badly to impress. Not only had she not revisited it in 22 years, though she had 'repeated' it often, but it had not even been soundly true at the time. She had told him what she thought he wanted to hear.

To some extent, this is true of most of us. We are loathe to change our fundamental beliefs. After all, if we start to mess around with them, where would we be? In fact, who would we be? Surely our identity would start to peel like an onion?

It will not! It will grow exponentially – because the beliefs you will have at the end of the process will be real. They will suit you now – suit you and your purpose, suit your goals, and then you will be free to go on to really achieve.

Most, if not all of us, are creatures of habit, resistant to change. Foods we hated in our childhood we will continue to avoid without ever seeing if our tastes have changed. Our instinct to 'stick with' is even stronger with beliefs.

## What is a belief?

We've been talking since the beginning of the book about beliefs. Before we go on, let's think about what we mean by a belief.

A belief can be a broad belief, for example relating to politics, religion, race, gender, sexuality, life choices, human rights or the law. Or it can be a specific belief relating to people, situations or aspects of your life.

We are going to ask you now to take the first step of identifying a fundamental belief, something that has a profound effect on the life you lead and the choices you make.

We're leading in with a mindfulness exercise to place you into the best possible learning state.

### **Exercise 1.3: Image Breathing**

This exercise is called Image Breathing. We will do it a few times through the programme, each time with a slightly deeper application.

As with many of our exercises, Image Breathing employs the imagination. It attaches the breath to calming or reassuring personalised mental images.

Again, begin by getting yourself as comfortable as possible, either sitting or lying down. If you are sitting, make sure that you have legs uncrossed and hands either on your lap or on your knees. Take a moment to just be aware of the parts of your body that have contact with the chair or with the floor. Take two breaths, slightly deeper than you would normally take, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth.

As this is the first time that you have done the exercise, rather than choose your own image, we'd like you to think of a beautiful beach on a sunny day. You are standing in the sea looking in towards the land. On each breath in, imagine the water gathering and, on each breath out, imagine that your breath is pushing the wave up onto the beach.

We're going to take four breaths. Keep focussed on the image of the beach. Really use your imagination – think of the details of what it is that you are seeing. What colour is the sand? What is the weather like? Can you see anything beyond the beach? How cold is the water? If any other thoughts come into your mind while you are doing the exercise, let them gently drift away and take your attention back to the image.

- ▶ Breathe in. And out.

**Exercise 1.4: Long-held Beliefs**

Take a moment to jot down a few of the most important and long-held beliefs you hold. Then, next to the belief, write down when you started believing it and when was the last time, if ever, that you revisited the belief.

**Exercise 1.5: Identifying a Key Belief**

With your eyes still closed, identify a belief that you hold, something that you hold dear or something that, thinking about it now, you realise has shaped and defined you and your life in some way. Write it down.

That is your first step in a very exciting and liberating journey. As you dig down, you will find that at the centre of resilience is the important trio of belief, attitude and meaning.

The heart of resilience



For a few days, try to be aware of the beliefs that you hold, the attitudes you have to the important things in your life and the things that give your life meaning.

As with mindfulness, it's really about noticing, learning to spot and identify your beliefs. There are probably beliefs that you hold that, deep down, you know are there. Others will pop up and absolutely surprise you. We humans have beliefs about some pretty crazy things. When we're training, Andy talks about one of his, which is the belief that, after you knock or ring the bell to go into someone's house, you *must* step

back from the step before they get to the door! And we've learned that a belief that seems ridiculous to one person will seem perfectly sensible to someone else.

## Recognising a belief

It may be useful to think about how a belief is expressed:

- ▶ Thought
- ▶ Emotion
- ▶ Behaviour

We find it's easiest to unpick if you think, for a moment, about anyone on TV or in public life who drives you mad – we all have one. So, for this person, it may break down as:

Thought – I think x is an idiot (feel free to substitute stronger language!).

Emotion – x makes me feel angry every time I see them.

Behaviour – I turn off the television every time x comes on.

Take the important belief that you wrote down and see if you can think about how it is expressed – thought, emotion, behaviour. Write these out:

- ▶ Thought
- ▶ Emotion
- ▶ Behaviour

## Meaning

Now focus for a moment on meaning.

We said that, over the course, you would gradually identify the beliefs that are most helpful and most important to you and bring them to the centre of your life. If you can marry your deepest beliefs, your meaning, your values, with your goals, then your objectives become so much easier to achieve.

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This is where you identify your meaning. Again, we will come back to this several times in the book.

### **Exercise 1.6: Meaning**

As a starting point, go back to all the different beliefs you have thought about during this chapter, write them down, if you haven't already, and put a tick beside them if, generally, the belief makes you happy, or a cross if, generally, it doesn't.

Now put another tick by those that you think are closely tied to what gives meaning to your life.

And, finally, make a statement about that meaning. For some people, this may be conceptual – 'doing good', 'making a difference', for others it may be much more specific – 'protecting my family'.

In each chapter, we'll put in a couple of frequently asked questions. Others can be found on our website.

### **Questions and Answers**

- ▶ **Increasing resilience is all very well, but shouldn't people just 'man up'? That's the simplest way, right?**

We would argue that this approach creates more issues than it solves. The Mind Fitness approach is around flexibility, being able to change. Invest the time in what is causing an issue and it will be solved rather than papered over.

- ▶ **I can't honestly say that I can pinpoint 'meaning' as such in my life. I go to work and come home. Watch a bit of telly. I just get on with it. Is this unusual? Why don't I have something that others seem to?**

Meaning in life doesn't have to be about big, profound things. It can be about the importance you place in doing your job well. It can be time spent with mates down the pub. A shared game of footy. A night out with the girls. A family meal. The things that we value. Simple pleasures or an important cause that's central to who you are. It's all based on meaning.

**Exercise 1.7: Chapter Recap****What have we learned?**

A short practical exercise to reinforce what we have covered. You can close your eyes if it helps.

- 1 Bring to mind the faces of three resilient people
- 2 Locate a situation in which you demonstrated resilience
- 3 Three key factors in determining resilience are belief, meaning and ...
- 4 Remind yourself of how you felt after the Image Breathing exercise
- 5 Give an example of a broad belief you have now or have had in the past
- 6 Give an example of a specific belief you have now or have had in the past
- 7 Why do you think you are likely to have more resilience if you are in touch with what gives your life meaning?
- 8 Think about a belief that you hold that has brought you great joy

## Conclusion

You have begun the process of identifying your beliefs and the things that are most important to you. We'll go on to learn how you can make sure that your central beliefs are helpful, to find ways to change or refocus the ones that are not, and to tie these beliefs to your goals and ambitions. Gradually, you will learn to side-step when you are in danger of getting in your own way, until finally you will see the world through the eyes of the best possible you.