

# Resilience

by Dr Mark Stacey

A recent report from the King's Fund (Nov 2014) commented on the concerns regarding motivation for those of us who work in the NHS. There is no doubt that there are many causes for this lack of motivation; including increased intensity of work, the lack of a pay rise for over five years and continued pressure to do more with less. This could potentially make us unhappy and resentful. There is an alternative, and potentially more useful, approach to improving the way that we perform, and this is by viewing such issues, not so much as a threat, but preferably as a challenge.

If one views such pressures as a challenge, that means that there are potential skills that one can learn that will improve one's resilience and enable one to deal with such pressures that occur in a more positive fashion. What I would like to do is to introduce a variety of skills that once learnt can become your habits and as you practise, eventually part of your behaviour. I call these my "Bakers Dozen Skills of Resilience".

So what can we do:

- Learn to **Train your Brain** to do what **you** want it to do – There are a variety of techniques that can be used to improve the way that our brain functions, but particularly useful tools include mindfulness and meditation. Recommended books include *The Chimp Paradox* by Steve Peters (sports psychologist for the Sky cycling team) or *Search Inside Yourself* by Chade Meng Tan (happiness expert at Google). A short, and very easy, meditation to learn, practise and perform is the 4 Deep-breath technique; which is where you breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, out for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4. Repeat that 4 times and you will feel considerably more relaxed.
- **Increase the Positive over the Negative** – Try and say 3, 4 or 5 positive things for every negative thing that you say.
- **Boost your Self-esteem** – Consider the things you are good at and recognise what others appreciate about you; try not to compare yourself (too much!) to others and praise yourself. Discuss with a colleague or friend 3 things that went well for you in the last 24 hours.
- Do some **physical exercise** – The 7-minute exercise regimen smartphone app, (surprisingly only takes 7 minutes): the session is quite arduous and can always be repeated if one is feeling very strong-no longer can you use the excuse that you have not got time for exercise.
- **Take Control** – Try not to use statements (called Anchors) that drag you back. Examples include; "I'm the victim of my personal history", "you only get one chance", or "this isn't fair". One of the more useful ways of dealing with such anchors is to reframe those anchors from threats into challenges.
- **Address your Stress Management Actively** – My favourite three are:
- **List stressors.** Being as specific as you can and then divide those stresses into three categories; the *Deal With Now* category, the *Deal With Later* Category and the *Ignore and Adapt To*. The *Deal With Now* stressors include matters that need to be dealt with within a short space of time. The *Deal With Later*, include for example examples like exams which usually involve planning to resolve that particular Stressor. The *Ignore and Adapt To Stressors* become part of a lifetime's work - this is again where meditation and mindfulness can be particularly useful.
- **The Helicopter Technique.** Look at a particular incident, for example road rage, fly up into the air and look at how important that particular incident was in your lifespan of 0-80 years (ie-not!).

- **The Stress Bucket.** I am going to give you a stress bucket which you can fill with the stressors of the day, and when you leave work you simply empty the bucket. When you get home you now have an empty stress bucket to fill with the stressors at home. You then reverse that process when you come back into work the following day. In order to empty the bucket you need a trigger; some people use opening the car door; I personally use the process of unlocking my bike as a trigger to empty my stress bucket.
- **Get Better at Decision-making** – In general, it is thought there are two primary modes of making decisions, summarised usually as System 1 and System 2. System 1 is rapid, is primeval and often inaccurate. System 2 is slower, requires more energy and is more meticulous. It is useful to know that there are two systems, and it is also useful to consider those systems when making decisions. A couple of useful books worth reading on this subject include; *The Decisive Moment* by Jonah Lehrer, *Decisive* by Chip and Dan Heath and *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman.
- **Ask for Help** – Help is always available; there are always people who can help you in some form or other. If you are not sure who to ask, ask somebody you like; ask them to point you in the right direction.
- **Don't Deal with Conflict aggressively** – In fact aggression is probably not a good way to deal with conflict as it tends to wind up the fight or flight system even more-becoming more assertive is a better way.
- **Learn Something** – Look upon yourself as having a learning muscle that needs training just like your other muscles. When was the last time you learnt something different or completely new?
- **Take Care of Yourself** – Look after the primeval urges, such as avoiding being hungry, angry, late or tired. Look after the people that you work with.
- **Visualise Success** – There is a great TEDTalk by Amy Cuddy, who talks about the Power Pose and the effect that it can have on your psychology and your physiology. Definitely worth watching. For ultimate Power Pose, think New Zealand *Hakka*.
- **Smile** – There's no doubt that smiling at people tends to generate its own smiles. Of course what it may also do is encourage a short trip to your local Psychiatrist, but in general I find it a very positive way of encouraging positive behaviour.

As you develop these skills and you practise them, and practise them, and practise them, you will find that they become a habit. If you practise them for many years and look at ways of mastering these skills they become part of your behaviour. If you want to learn the 5 steps to mastery (of a skill) it is useful to look at Anders Ericsson's work on Expertise – *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*. He considers 5 steps towards mastery which are; 1. Deliberate Practise; 2. Repeat Repeat Repeat; 3. Seek Constant Critical Feedback; 4. Focus ruthlessly on where you need help; and 5. Prepare for the process to be mentally and physically exhausting. It is not easy, but it is certainly worth doing.

Finally, if you want some more reading matter, particularly in looking at the way that we behave and interact with others, look at the work by David Rock on the Scarf Model. He investigates the effect of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness, on our behaviour and the behaviour of others.

So, to summarise, here is a short prescription for health behaviour (no excuses):

- Look at improving your physical health; incorporate the 7-minute exercise regimen in to your life (or just stop taking the lift).
- Look at your cognitive health, practise every day a 5-minute mindfulness technique, or more if you can spare the time.
- Examine your happiness: every day consider 3 things you are proud of achieving today. Perform random acts of kindness.
- Learn a new skill, take up a new hobby, make sure your life has a purpose, look at strategies for optimising your sleep.

## References

- Books
- Search Inside Yourself – Chade-Meng Tan
- Chimp Paradox – Steve Peters
- The Decisive Moment – Jonah Lehrer
- Thinking Fast and Slow – Dan Kahneman
- The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance – Anders Ericsson
- Appendix
- 7 Minute Exercise – Android and iPhone
- TEDTalk - Amy Cuddy