



Articles

Cultivating Emotional Resilience: A Leader's #1 Job by Eileen McDargh

Pivot. Punt. Pretend. Procrastinate. These are all words leaders might say out loud (or to themselves) as the world moves into the continuous uncertainty brought about by a pandemic that's more than a temporary crisis. The "normal" factors of our lives have all been smashed: where we work, how we work, whom we see, what we feel, how we educate our children, and which industries are destined to close their doors forever.

None of us have ever been in a disaster that circles the globe with no end in sight.

What does this mean for those in leadership positions? Cultivating emotional resilience in ourselves and others has now become job number one. What makes this so difficult is that our logical brain seeks to find data, facts, and tried-and-true methods to move *through* this situation. We scramble to tune up our technology, change marketing strategies, find other revenue sources, or make cost-cutting decisions, all while doubling down on being rational and analytical.

Now, that's all very practical. But it's not where emotional resilience resides. Instead, emotional resilience resides in our limbic brain, which seeks feelings of trust, transparency, courage, and compassion.

Resilience is about growth

Resilience isn't about bouncing back or returning to normal. It's about growing through challenges and opportunities to become stronger, wiser, and more skilled in the process. Ultimately, resilience comes down to energy management. It's about whether we have the emotional, mental, and physical energy to move forward. You can be exhausted at the end of the day, but if your emotional energy says it was a day well spent, you've added another arrow in your resilience quiver.

Resiliency starts with an honest assessment

To build a culture of emotional resilience, leaders must begin from the inside out. Specifically, leaders must first honestly assess their own emotions about living in a world of constant uncertainty, anxiety, and, yes, even fear.

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When the pandemic first started, many of us used “surge capacity” to operate. This term was first defined by Ann Marsten, Ph.D., a psychologist and professor of child development at the University of Minnesota. Surge capacity is a collection of adaptive systems humans can draw on for short-term survival in stressful situations. It explains why we stockpiled water, food, medicine, and toilet paper during the first days of the pandemic. (Though I am still rather befuddled about people hoarding toilet paper.)

From all-hands zoom meetings to kitchen counters transformed into office spots, from holding virtual dinners to cleaning out closets and garages, from experimenting with meals to discovering new family games, putting something positive into action provided us with feelings of control and relief. Until it didn't. The crisis phase didn't stop. And for leaders who are used to solving problems and getting things done, this inability to make headway began to undermine the very thing we need most: resilience.

So, how can we right the ship and build resilience in ourselves and others?

Understand that resilience is cultivated. Resilience is a life skill, and, just like growing a plant, it takes tilling the soil, weeding what doesn't belong, feeding the plant, and nurturing it. How does your resilience “garden” look? What's the weed that seems to be choking your energy? These are the very questions leaders can ask individual team members, as long as you are truly open to listening in a non-defensive way.

Acknowledge, to yourself and your team, that life is different now. There's no way to gloss over our new reality or pretend that life hasn't changed. Every member of your team has experienced loss to some degree. And with loss comes grief, which might range from denial to anger to acceptance.

Allow space for yourself and others to express emotional vulnerability. In many ways, this strange, new world offers opportunities for us to know each other in deeper ways than we did in our pre-pandemic lives. Titles and positions on an organizational chart have little impact when we realize we're all in this together.

Recognize that daily pressures can feel relentless—and may induce fear. Jim Parke, the CEO of smartphone-case manufacturer Otter Products, knew that anxiety among his 1,100 employees was intense. What happens if someone gets sick with COVID-19? Is it safe to come to work? Will the company be okay?

According to an [article](#) written by Larry Kanter, former executive editor of *Inc.*, Parke decided to hold a frank Q&A session with his entire company. He's begun sending twice-weekly video messages on the company's financial condition and strategy. Plus, he sets aside time to virtually meet with individual employees at all levels of the company.

Feel the pain with your team. Sharing pain sets up an emotional bond that boosts confidence in you as a leader. For example, at Otter Products, Parke offered the company's 600 distribution center employees—who aren't able to work remotely—the ability to opt out with full pay if they

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are too frightened to come to work or live with a high-risk individual. Those who do work are paid time and a half.

To make this happen, Parke cut executive salaries by 30% and his own pay to \$1 a year. As Parke explains, “Every leader wants to be a calming voice, but if your actions don’t match your words, it rings hollow.”

Consider offering virtual mental-health solutions. This could include meditation sessions, virtual workout classes, desktop yoga, and webinars about mental health.

Create deep social connections. Loneliness is a feeling of isolation. Just like resilience, the social connections that combat loneliness need to be cultivated and tended. Look for quality time versus quantity. Create a list of people you can reach out to, and then follow through.

Release unrealistic expectations of yourself and others. Burnout is the result of depleting one’s emotional and physical resources by trying to fulfill a “goal” or a “demand” that drains energy. Now is the time to kick unrealistic, pre-pandemic expectations to the curb. Stop when your emotional limbic brain says stop.

Replenish your energy. Where do you get your energy? What kind of downtime do you need? Ask your team this same question. Rethink what options you *do* have to refill your energy tank.

For instance, just because you can’t eat out doesn’t mean you can’t experiment with new food in your home. Just because you can’t go to piano class doesn’t mean you can’t find instruction via YouTube. My youngest granddaughter just taught herself how to play the ukulele from watching a YouTube video!

Make gratitude a daily practice. Think about what you are grateful for and write it down. Think of this as putting a deposit into your resilience bank account. When we realize how much we have to be thankful for, the pain of the pandemic lessens. It’s also a great way to begin or end a virtual meeting. Let individual team members know what you appreciate about them.

One other thought: do something for someone else every day. Leave soup at the door of an elderly neighbor. One woman I know surprised postal workers with her homemade lemon cakes just to say thank you. One of the postal workers started crying. When you reach out to others, you recharge your emotional resilience.

Remember the word of Howard Zinn, the philosopher: “To have hope, one doesn’t need certainty—only possibility.” At the end of the day, a leader’s ability to cultivate emotional resilience in oneself and others is to be a hope merchant.

Art from the Heart Makes Hospitals Smile



No job is ever ordinary—particularly if one chooses to make it “work”. Kahlil Gibran wrote, *“Work is love made visible.”* No place is this more evident than at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis where a 33-year-old housekeeper decided to make patients smile through her art.

In a recent engagement to speak to oncology nurses at **Siteman Cancer Center**, located on the campus of **Barnes-Jewish Hospital**, **I found myself mesmerized and smiling at a huge purple elephant painted on a window and at various other art objects tacked to a wall.**

To my surprise, the art is the work of Kailey Custard, a full-time employee in environmental services who on her first day of work, noticed a colorful pair of

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two giraffes facing each other. The giraffes could be seen by patients and staff at St. Louis Children's hospital across the street.

Kailey decided to join the fun. "Art is something that makes people happy because they can relate to it," says Custard. *"People are battling cancer on this floor and it's sad. Instead of always being sad, I wanted to help our patients feel better."*

With the help of the nursing staff, patients and visitors now see pinwheels, paper flowers and new window paintings on the unit. Custard completes her projects on her breaks. According to Mary Drago, BSN, RN Clinical Nurse Manager on Custard's floor, *"Kailey coordinates art projects for staff, patients and visitors. She sings to our patients, makes waffles for the nurses, drew this amazing purple elephant on a window, while keep our floors spotless."*

BJG housekeepers are supplied with "while you were out" cards to let patients know what services were done while they were out of their room. But Kailey goes one step further. On the back of the card, she draws pictures or writes something encouraging. Custard believes this brings her closer to the staff, patients and visitors.

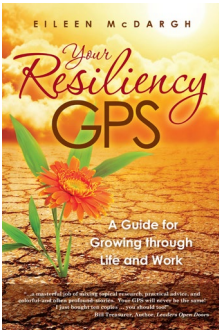
As I learned more about Kailey Custard. I realize she's not a housekeeper. She's a homemaker.

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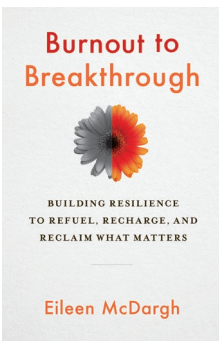
[Well Leaders Lead Well: How to Create and Sustain a Culture of Wellness During COVID-19 and Beyond](#)

Recommended Reading



Your Resiliency GPS: A Guide for Growing through Life and Work

Available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Burnout to Breakthrough: Building Resilience to Refuel, Recharge, and Reclaim What Matters • **Burnout to Breakthrough: Available at a 30% discount thru Dec 31, 2020 here**

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