

RESILIENCY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

The Hidden Strengths of Those with Lived
Experience of Mental Health Conditions

*“Although the world
is full of suffering,
it is also full of the
overcoming of it.”*

- Helen Keller



Preface

Community stay-at-home guidance, social distancing efforts, and wearing masks or face coverings have proven to be effective in slowing down the spread of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. To keep the spread of the novel coronavirus down people are asked to continue following social distancing guidelines, which can impact employment and feelings of connectedness. Many people have not seen loved ones in-person for months. These are all very difficult on one's mental health.

People with lived experience of mental health conditions have tremendous insight to share regarding their strengths, history, and experience in facing challenges. People with lived experience have learned to adapt over time to stressful situations and life-changing events, due in part to hard-earned and well-developed

resiliency.¹⁻³ When the journey becomes challenging, and at times feels unbearable, it's possible that resiliency is what gets us through.

Many people with lived experience of mental health conditions have had disruptions and challenges that derailed career paths and impacted social networks and community connections and have had to develop and hone their resilience to be able to continue their recovery journey. Like these other interruptions in our lives, living with the impact of COVID-19 now requires us to reconnect, continue, or establish new relationships with support systems.

What is Resiliency?

Resiliency is becoming a familiar term that we hear mental health experts, researchers, persons with lived experience, and advocates talk about

often. Many experts believe people with lived experience of mental health conditions have become skilled at building and maintaining resilience. In their research findings, Collazzoni et al define resiliency as a positive adaption that allows people with lived experience to regain mental health, despite facing adversity. They suggest that resiliency is dynamic throughout the lifespan and interacts, as a modifying factor, with major areas of life functioning.³ The resiliency of people with lived mental health experience is evident in their ability to identify and connect to, and sometimes even create, the resources they need to survive and thrive. Often mental health experts use the term resiliency as 'bouncing back' and this can be particularly important after people have experienced a setback or faced a difficult situation.⁴

Resilience Defined

Psychologists define *resilience* as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.² As much as resilience involves "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.

Being resilient doesn't mean that a person won't have trouble or experience distress. People who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives commonly experience emotional pain and stress. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.²

I was diagnosed with a mental health condition at the age of thirteen, which led to many hospitalizations, treatment center admissions and other mental health services (e.g., the Department of Mental Health).

I continue to receive services from the Department of Mental Health (DMH), and they have been instrumental in my recovery.

My former DMH case worker helped me find and utilize my two hidden strengths: resiliency and resourcefulness. Resiliency is a skill that I developed due to challenging life situations and illness. It has morphed into a superpower, allowing me to maintain my recovery and to handle whatever life throws at me, including COVID-19.

-iSPARC Staff Member

Core Strengths of Resilient People

By interviewing specific groups of extremely resilient people, researchers at Yale Medical School have observed some of the same factors coming up again and again in resilient populations. They have identified:

- A realistic optimism
- The ability to face one's fears
- A strong moral compass
- Social support networks
- A spiritual sense to mental and physical fitness
- The availability of resilient role models, psychological flexibility
- Skill in finding purpose and meaning as recurring themes in these individuals.⁴⁻⁵

Overcoming the stress and anxiety one feels during long-term events such as the current pandemic can be difficult. But recovery is possible. Researchers have identified a

core set of universal elements that contribute to developing resiliency and offer tips and actions that can assist people in weathering life's unexpected storms.⁴ These core elements often include:

- Social support and connectedness
- Taking care of yourself (e.g., drinking plenty of water, eating right, getting enough sleep, staying away from alcohol and other drugs, and regular exercise)
- Remaining hopeful and finding meaning in each day
- Learning from experiences
- Being proactive.

Tips and Action Steps for Building & Maintaining Resiliency

Get and stay connected. Maintaining strong, positive relationships with loved ones and friends can provide you with the support and acceptance in not only the good times, but also the bad times. Try to

reserve an hour or two each week to call and connect with, or arrange a walk or outdoor activity, with a friend or family member. Look for online peer support groups, games, or hobbies to connect with others.

Maintain your health (mental and physical). Continuing treatment or reconnecting with providers is important for your wellbeing. Attend in-person appointments (if possible) or take advantage of any telehealth services that are offered.

Take care of yourself. Tend to your own needs and feelings. Participate in activities and hobbies you can enjoy safely. Include physical activity in your daily routine along with relaxing activities such as yoga, meditation, guided imagery, deep breathing, or prayer.

Make every day meaningful. Do something that gives you a sense of accomplishment and purpose every day. Set goals to help you look toward the future with meaning.



image credit: rawpixel

Remember you are not alone.

The first thing is to remember as we make changes in our lives in response to the pandemic is that you are not alone on this journey. There isn't one person in the Commonwealth who hasn't been impacted by COVID-19. This is a trying time, but we will make it through this challenge with our strengths and resiliency.

Remain hopeful. You can't change the past; you can't will away the pandemic, but you can always look toward the future. Accepting and even anticipating change makes it easier to adapt and view new challenges and options with less anxiety. You've got this! You've done this before while living with and managing mental health conditions.

Learn from experience. Think of how you've coped with hardships in the past. Acknowledge the work that you've put in toward your recovery in the past and present. Consider the skills and strategies that helped you through difficult times when you were not doing well. You might even write about past experiences in a journal to help you identify positive and negative thoughts and emotions that will help guide your future actions. It can take time to recover from a major setback like the pan-

demic.

It is OK to Ask for Help. Reach out and ask for help when you need it. Asking for and receiving help (professional or other) when you need it is critical to strengthening and maintaining your resilience. Recognizing that you need it and asking for help is a sign of strength and an important part of staying resilient.

As both a young adult and an individual with lived mental health experience, I am continuously faced with adversity and challenges. My ability to be resilient is what gives me the strength and hope.

No matter how much I've struggled, I've always managed to pick myself back up and find a way to overcome the challenges in front me.

Being a leader means being able to have an unbreakable can-do attitude and mentality to be confident in the face of adversity. During times of crisis, my mastery of resilience not only keeps me going but allows me to inspire others to do the same.

COVID-19 is amongst the greatest challenges we are facing as a nation. My resiliency is rising to the challenge of meeting it head-on to keep myself and others inspired to keep moving forward.

-iSPARC Staff Member

If you or a family member are experiencing a mental health or substance use disorder crisis, the **Emergency Services Program/Mobile Crisis Intervention (ESP/MCI)** is available **24** hours a day, **7** days a week, **365** days a year.

Anyone may contact ESP/MCI for assistance.

Call toll-free at 1 (877) 382 - 1609.

Resources

Harvard Medical School

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/ramp-up-your-resilience>

Maintaining Your Emotional Wellness During COVID-19

<https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1146&context=pib>

Massachusetts's COVID-19 Updates & Information

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-updates-and-information>

Massachusetts Department of Public Health Information on the Outbreak of COVID-19

<https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

Mclean Hospital

<https://www.mcleanhospital.org/news/caring-your-mental-health-despite-coronavirus>

National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI) COVID-19 Resource & Information Guide

<https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/NAMI-HelpLine/COVID-19-Information-and-Resources/COVID-19-Resource-and-Information-Guide>

Parents Chime In: Our Self-Care Strategies While Supporting Loved Ones with Mental Health Conditions During a Pandemic

<https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1150&context=pib>

Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rethink-your-way-the-good-life/202004/how-we-find-resilience-during-impossible-times>

Mayo Clinic

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/iJournal-of-Community-Psychology-n-depth/resilience/art-20046311>

SAMSHA

<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/webinars-podcasts/resiliency-in-disaster-behavioral-health>

University of Pennsylvania

<https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/resilience-programs/resilience-skill-set>

University of Southern California

<https://news.usc.edu/158476/what-is-resilience-usc-researchers-seeking-secrets/>

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3. Collazoni, A., Stratta, P., Pacitti, F., Rossi, A., Santarelli, V., Bustini, M., Talevi, D., Succi, V., & Rossi, R. (2020). Resilience as a mediator between interpersonal risk factors and hopelessness in depression. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11*, 10.
4. Southwick, S., & Charney, D. (2018). *Resilience: The science of mastering life's greatest challenges* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
5. Fellman, B. (2014). Yes, you can cope. *Yale Medicine*. Retrieved from <https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/yes-you-can-cope/>

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