

[stress management](#)

## **Surviving Tough Times by Building Resilience**

**Whether you're facing a global or personal crisis—or a mix of both—building resilience can help you cope with stress, overcome adversity, and enjoy the better days to come.**



### **Experiencing hardship and adversity**

Lately, the world seems to be lurching from one crisis to another. We've experienced a global pandemic, dramatic changes to how we conduct our daily lives, economic

uncertainty, and political and social turmoil, as well as an array of natural disasters. Then there are personal traumas that people are also dealing with, such as the loss of a loved one, declining health, unemployment, divorce, violent crime, or tragic accidents. For many us, this is a time of unprecedented struggle and upheaval.

Whether the source of disruption in your life is a global emergency or a personal tragedy—or both—living through difficult times can take a heavy toll on your mood, health, and outlook. It can leave you feeling helpless and overwhelmed by stress and anxiety. You may be painfully grieving all that you've lost, flooded by a slew of difficult, conflicting emotions, or uncertain about how to move on with your life. You may even feel that your life is totally out of control and you're powerless to affect whatever may happen next.

While there's no way to avoid sorrow, adversity, or distress in life, there are ways to help smooth the rough waters and regain a sense of control. Resilience is the ability to cope with the loss, change, and trauma that have been inevitable parts of life even before these extraordinary times. Building resilience can help you better adapt to life-changing events, cope with turbulent times, and bounce back from hardship and tragedy.

## **The role of resilience in times of crisis**

Why do some people seem to be better able to cope in these troubling times than others? While everyone's situation is different, it is true that people with resilience tend to have a higher tolerance for the emotional distress generated by hard times. The more resilient you are, the better you're able to tolerate the feelings of stress, anxiety, and sadness that accompany trauma and adversity—and find a way to rebound from setbacks.

We all go through bad times, we all experience disappointment, loss, and change, and we all feel sad, anxious, and stressed at various times in our lives. But building resilience can help you to maintain a positive outlook, face an [uncertain future](#) with less fear, and get through even the darkest days.

### **Building resilience**

If you're more sensitive to emotional distress and are finding it difficult to cope with hardship or adversity, it's important not to think of it as some kind of character flaw. Resilience isn't a macho quality and it isn't fixed; it's an ongoing process that requires effort to build and maintain over time.

Unless you've faced adversity in your life before, it's unlikely you've had the need or

opportunity to develop resilience. Drawing on past experiences can help you cope with the challenges you're facing today. Even if you've struggled to cope with adversity in the past, you may at least be able to recognize some of the ways of coping that DON'T help, such as trying to numb your feelings with [drugs or alcohol](#).

While it's often difficult to imagine anything good coming out of traumatic experiences, building resilience can help you find any positives in the difficulties you've faced. Surviving hardships can teach you important things about yourself and the world around you, strengthen your resolve, deepen your empathy, and in time enable you to evolve and grow as a human being.

Building resilience can also help you to:

- Stay focused, flexible, and productive, in both good and bad times.
- Feel less afraid of new experiences or an uncertain future.
- Manage and tolerate strong emotions outside your comfort zone, even those you'd rather avoid like anger or despair.
- Strengthen your relationships and improve your communication skills, especially under pressure.
- Bolster your self-esteem.
- Be confident you'll eventually find a solution to a problem, even when one isn't immediately apparent.

You can develop and improve these qualities of resilience at any time, regardless of your age, background, or circumstances. The following tips can help you face hardships with more confidence, better cope with these tumultuous times, and make it through to the brighter, more hopeful days ahead.

## **Building resilience tip 1: Practice acceptance**

While we all react to stressful events in different ways, many of us try to protect ourselves by refusing to accept the truth of what's happening. After all, by denying that you're even experiencing a crisis, you can kid yourself that you still have some sense of control over what are usually uncontrollable events.

While denial can have some positive functions—it can give you an opportunity to come to terms with the shock of a traumatic event, for example—over time, it will just prolong your pain. Staying in denial will prevent you from adapting to your new circumstances, stop you from seeking solutions or taking action, and stifle the healing process.

## Accept the situation

Change is an inevitable part of life and many aspects of the changing world are outside your individual control. You can't control the spread of a virus, for example, the pace of social change, or how the economy will recover. While it can be tough to acknowledge, railing against events or circumstances outside your control will only drain you of energy and leave you feeling anxious and hopeless. Accepting your situation, on the other hand, can free you up to devote your energy to the things that you do have control over.

**Focus on things within your control.** Make a list of all the things you can't control and give yourself permission to [stop worrying about them](#). Instead, focus on the action that you can take. If you're unemployed, you can't control whether the ideal job appears in the wants ads or whether an employer will grant you an interview. But you can control how much time and effort you put into searching for work or brushing up on your skills. Similarly, if a loved one is facing a life-threatening illness, you may have to relinquish control to the medical experts, but you can still focus on providing your loved one with as much emotional support as possible.

**Accept change by looking to your past.** Looking back at examples where you've coped with uncertainty and change before can help you accept your current situation. Perhaps you suffered a painful breakup in the past and were eventually able to move on with your life, or you lost a job and ended up finding a better one? Examining your past successes can also help you see past the current crisis and derive some confidence that you'll be able to pull through again.

## Accept your feelings

It's tempting to believe that the best way to get through hard times is by ignoring painful emotions and "putting on a brave face". But unpleasant emotions exist whether you choose to acknowledge them or not. Trying to prevent your emotions from surfacing will only fuel your stress, delay acceptance of your new situation, and prevent you from moving on.

By allowing yourself to feel your emotions, you'll find that even the most intense, upsetting feelings will pass, the trauma of these tough times will start to fade, and you'll be able to find a path forward. Talk to someone you trust about what you're experiencing or use HelpGuide's [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) to reconnect with your emotions.

## Grieve your losses

Undergoing tough times usually involves some kind of loss. Whether it's the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the loss of your old life, it's important you allow yourself the opportunity to grieve. Only by [facing your grief](#)—acknowledging and mourning your losses—will you be able to heal and eventually move on with your life.

## Tip 2: Reach out to others

One of the reasons why the [coronavirus pandemic hit many of us so hard](#) is that lockdown and quarantine isolated us from other people, often forcing us to bottle up how we're feeling. Connecting with friends and family when you're going through tough times can help ease stress, boost your mood, and make sense of all the change and disruption. Instead of feeling like you're facing your problems alone, you can draw strength and build resilience from having others to lean on.

[\[Read: Coronavirus Mental Health Toolkit: Getting Through the COVID Winter\]](#)

The people you reach out to don't need to have answers to the problems you're facing; they just need to be willing to listen to you without judging. In fact, what you talk about or the words used are often unimportant. It's the human connection—eye contact, a smile, or a hug—that can make all the difference to how you're feeling.

**Prioritize relationships**, even in times of social distancing. Nothing carries the same health benefits as connecting face-to-face with someone who is caring and empathetic. These days, however, it's not always possible to see friends and loved ones in person. If you're kept apart by quarantine, social distancing, or travel restrictions, reach out to others via phone, video chat, or social media.

**Don't withdraw in tough times.** You may be inclined to retreat into your shell when you're facing challenges in your life. You may fear being a burden to friends and loved ones or feel too exhausted to reach out. But try to keep up with social activities even when you don't feel like it. Good friends won't consider you a burden—they're more likely to feel flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them.

**Try to avoid negative people.** Some friends are good listeners, kind and empathetic. Others seem to only fuel negative emotions, leaving you feeling even more stressed, anxious, or panicky. Try to avoid anyone who magnifies your problems, criticizes, or makes

you feel judged.

**Expand your social network.** Even though relationships are vital for [good mental health](#), building resilience, and getting through tough times, many of us feel that we don't have anyone to turn to in times of need. But there are plenty of ways to [build new friendships](#) and improve your support network. If you know others who are lonely or isolated, be the one to take the initiative and reach out.

## Tip 3: Invest in self-care

Living through tough times can be both mentally and physically draining. Constantly being in a heightened state of stress can lead to serious health problems, impact your immune and digestive systems, increase your risk of heart attack and stroke, and [lead to burnout](#), a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion.

Since the body and mind are so closely linked, investing in self-care is an important part of building resilience and getting through times of great stress. When your body feels strong and healthy so, too, will your mind. While circumstances may limit some of your usual healthy habits, there are still plenty of ways to care for yourself.

**Get enough exercise.** When you're dealing with chronic stress, you likely carry it somewhere in your body. Maybe your muscles are tense, you have back or neck pain, frequent headaches, insomnia, heartburn, or an upset stomach? Getting regular exercise not only releases powerful endorphins in the brain to improve your mood, but it can also help to ease tension in the body and counteract the physical symptoms of stress. Even if you can't go to a gym or exercise in public, there are effective ways to [stay active at home](#).

**Practice a "mind and body" relaxation technique.** [Practices](#) such as yoga, tai chi, and meditation blend deep breathing and body awareness to help you relieve stress and bring your nervous system back into balance. Try one of HelpGuide's [audio meditations](#) to boost your physical and emotional well-being.

**Improve your sleep.** When you're facing adversity, nothing wears down your resilience like missing out on a good night's sleep. Often, improving your daytime habits and taking the time to relax and unwind before bed can help you [sleep better at night](#).

**Eat well.** There are no specific foods that can help build resilience and weather tough times. Rather, it's your overall dietary pattern that's important. Eating lots of processed and takeout food can take a toll on your brain and mood, sapping your energy, and weakening



your immune system. A [healthy diet](#), on the other hand—one that's low in sugar and rich in healthy fats—can give you the energy and focus to tackle the challenges you're facing.

## **Manage your overall stress levels**

Taking steps to [manage your overall stress](#) can break the hold it has over your life, improve your mood, and help you build the resilience you need to hold up under pressure at this time.

## **Tip 4: Look for meaning and purpose**

It's easy to get overwhelmed by frightening headlines or consumed by the crisis you're facing. But whatever your circumstances, it doesn't have to define you as a person. You're not your crisis. By pursuing activities that bring purpose and meaning to your life, you can keep your problems in perspective, prevent them from overwhelming you, and maintain your identity.

Everyone is different so we all have different ways of experiencing purpose and meaning. Don't limit yourself by others' expectations; pursue activities that are important to you and add satisfaction to your life.

**Give help to others.** When you're in the midst of a crisis, it's common to feel powerless and helpless. By proactively helping others, you can regain a sense of control as well as find purpose in your life. In fact, giving support can be just as beneficial as receiving support. Try [volunteering](#), helping others in your neighborhood, giving blood, donating to a charity, or marching for a cause that's important to you.

**Pursue your hobbies and interests.** In turbulent times, it's important not to cast aside interests that nourish your spirit. For many of us, it's these things that define us as individuals and bring meaning to our lives. Whether it's playing a sport, [caring for a pet](#), an artistic or musical endeavor, home improvement projects, or spending time in nature, continuing to draw pleasure from your pastimes adds to your ability to cope with the stress of difficult times.

## Tip 5: Stay motivated

An important part of coping with adversity and making it through tough times is to foster qualities of persistence and endurance. Tough times don't last forever, but by their very nature they're rarely over quickly. As you plot a road through the darkness, you need to find ways to stay motivated and persevere.

**Deal with your problems one step at a time.** If a problem is too big to deal with all at once, try breaking it down into smaller, more manageable steps. If your problem seems to have no possible solution, you can still take action by drawing up a list, researching more about the subject, or seeking the advice of a trusted friend or loved one.

**Celebrate small wins.** To stay motivated and positive as you navigate stormy seas in life, take a moment to savor your small successes. If you're looking for work, for example, getting an interview isn't as meaningful as landing a job, but it's a sign of progress, a step in the right direction. Noting these small wins can give you a welcome break from all the stress and negativity you're facing and encourage you to keep going.

**Try to maintain a hopeful outlook.** While it's difficult to stay positive and hopeful in the midst of a crisis, many of us tend to blow our problems out of proportion and make them seem even more negative than they really are. Try taking a step back and examining your situation as an outsider. Are there rays of hope that you can focus on? Instead of worrying about what you fear may happen, try visualizing what you'd like to happen instead.

**Express gratitude.** It may sound trite, but even when you're experiencing terrible times, it's usually possible to find one thing you can be grateful about—the love of a pet, for example, a beautiful sunset, or a caring friend. Taking a moment to acknowledge your gratitude for such small things can provide respite from the stress and really boost your mood.

**Be kind to yourself.** We're all going through a lot at the moment and everyone adjusts to change and upheaval differently. Don't criticize your coping skills or beat yourself up for every mistake you make. Self-compassion is an important part of building resilience, so go easy on yourself.

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## **Will you help keep HelpGuide free for all?**

One in four people will struggle with mental health at some point in their lives. And with the coronavirus pandemic and troubled economy, many are in crisis right now. More than ever, people need a trustworthy place to turn to for guidance and hope. That is our mission at HelpGuide. Our free online resources ensure that everyone can get the help they need when they need it—no matter what health insurance they have, where they live, or what they can afford. But as a nonprofit that doesn't run ads or accept corporate sponsorships, we need your help. If you have already contributed, thank you. If you haven't, please consider helping us reach those who need it: [Donate today from as little as \\$3](#).

Last updated: June 2020



### **Get more help**

[Building your resilience](#) - A roadmap for adapting to life-changing situations. (American Psychological Association)

[Tolerating Distress](#) - Tools to help you face your feelings during difficult times. (Centre for Clinical Interventions)

[Five Science-Backed Strategies to Build Resilience](#) - Ways to build resilience and confront emotional pain. (Greater Good Magazine, UC Berkeley)