

Resilience

What you need
to know about
personal
wellbeing

YOU HAVE THE POWER TO MAKE CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE AND WORK,
AND TO FOSTER YOUR OWN WELLBEING. HOW? BY MOVING FROM YOUR
COMFORT ZONE INTO YOUR COURAGE ZONE. **DEBRA FERGUSON** EXPLAINS.

Stress is part of life and it will be part of our experience whether we like it or not. When we let *unmanaged* stress manifest in us – physically, psychologically and emotionally – it is like a pressure cooker that is building up steam. The more we allow it to control how we feel in everything we do, the more pressure we will feel. Our choices are to let the stress overwhelm us and deplete our wellbeing and relationships or to develop our skills to cope and move on to building a happier, healthier and more productive life.

Resiliency skills can be developed to manage stress and the more reserves we have, the better the buffer for when times are tough.

Taking responsibility for your wellbeing

‘Enough is enough! I don’t want to keep feeling this way...’

As humans we are simple creatures, motivated by either pleasure or pain. Life at any one time can be a blend of the two, but whatever is the overriding sense will determine your wellbeing. So, what is your balance? Are you feeling more negative stress – or pain – than pleasure in your life?

You do have choices in which you can:

- ❑ ignore the situation and everything will stay the same
- ❑ look at your strengths physically, emotionally and mentally, recognise them and activate them in times of need
- ❑ build your resiliency buffer zone, so when times are tough you can tap into your life experience and skills so the impact of negative stressors on your life are lessened, and
- ❑ choose your attitude and train your mind like you train your body.

Personal power

Each one of us has personal power and its strength can be related to our level of mental health. It is what drives us, energises us and helps us feel passion and a sense of control in our lives. Power is gained from our values, principles and self-esteem. When we feel strong and determined, we feel power-

ful. Our personal power helps us to focus on our purpose and gives us initiative and creativity.

All relationships are based on power. In a nurturing relationship, power is used in a just and equal manner. We give and take and it is a natural flow that is respectful to each person. Power can, however, also be misused.

When relationships are difficult and we are challenged by other people, it usually means the power is unequal. In extreme situations such as bullying, the primary factor is power misuse and abuse; however, there are times when our power can be depleted by either our own attitudes or behaviours or those of others.

We lose personal power when we feel undermined and our confidence and self-esteem are diminished. This can make us feel weakened, vulnerable and sometimes depressed. Finding and building our personal power and feeling the life force it provides is a major contributor to building our resilience and a great booster for our wellbeing.

Personal power can, as Stephen Covey explains in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, be divided into four main areas in which we can get a sense of control back into our lives:

- ❑ self-awareness – where you have the power and skill to analyse your thoughts and actions
- ❑ conscience – knowing what is right and wrong, based on your values
- ❑ imagination – creating new possibilities, and
- ❑ willpower – having the power of choice to make the decisions in your life.

Developing these four types of power is the essence of building your resilience.

Feeling in control

Under pressure, we can often have the sense of being ‘out of control.’ This is usually a good indicator that you are feeling stressed, vulnerable and overwhelmed by what is happening. Bringing your life under control is possible by recognising what you can control and letting go of the rest. You can control your attitudes, your choices and responses,

your mental strength and physical fitness. You can’t control other people.

Educators are renowned, however, for wanting to be in control. Learning that there are some things that we just can’t control can be confronting. It can also be liberating to learn that it’s pointless wasting your precious energy on things that are impossible to change.

Some people expend a lot of precious energy worrying what people think of them and what others say about them. Worrying about the past and mistakes you may have made, and wishing things were different, are all certain ways of depleting your power by losing energy for the important things in your life.

Moving from your comfort zone into your courage zone

Living in our predictable and safe comfort zone is easy. It’s our subconscious way of resisting change. Our comfort zone is the habit of our choices, responses and attitudes. We all know the feeling of being with people we know, eating the same foods and doing the same things each day. It’s the predictability that keeps us safe.

If this is working for you and your relationships fulfil and nourish you, that’s wonderful. For many of us, however, this is not the case and some fine-tuning needs to occur. We do have the power to make this happen.

To make changes in our lives we need to move out of our comfort zone. This involves an understanding that what we are doing right now isn’t working as we want. Remember, nothing changes if nothing changes.

The fear of the unknown can be very daunting; however, for a resilient and powerful person, the unknown can be energising. Change requires risk and a decision to move out of your comfort zone. It will disrupt the norm because there has been a shift in what you’ve been doing, thinking or how you have been responding. Change promotes difference and can be positive because life is about the evolution of ideas, of friends, of work and of challenges. That’s what helps you grow, develop and learn. Change can be exciting.

WELLBEING TIPS

Nothing changes if nothing changes. Your physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing is your responsibility.

With a sense of self-awareness, one of the main things you can control in your life is how you respond to what happens to you. Being in control of your behaviour, emotions and responses is a major contributor to your wellbeing. Use your energy and power to control what you can – and let go of the rest. You cannot control other people, so don't waste your energy.

REMEMBER

You have the power to determine how you feel and make changes in your life to promote your wellbeing and minimise the stressors that deplete you.

To make positive changes in your life requires courage. It's about moving from your comfort zone into your courage zone and recognising the benefits of the changes you want to make. It will help you feel more powerful, in control and centred. To get to the stage of making changes in your life to promote your wellbeing, you need first to look at what is happening right now.

- Are there factors in your life that are depleting you as a person, that are eroding your wellbeing and making you feel anxious, pressured or overwhelmed?
- Is your norm disrupted by a person's behaviour, a situation or by one of your bad habits?

You have the power to control how you respond, but first you have to know what the issues are. Knowing what you have to deal with is the first step to minimising the impact of negative stressors and building your resilience to them.

Identifying the risks to your wellbeing

Here's a working example.

Identify the risk: The length and frequency of rambling meetings.

Assess the risk: It leaves you feeling frustrated, depleted and angry, which affects your wellbeing in the form of headaches, back pain and opening the second bottle of wine that evening.

Control the risks: Let the leadership and team know of your concerns. This may not be easy to do; however, asserting your needs is a powerful way of investing in your wellbeing. Ask them what they consider reasonable and how the communication process can be improved. Creating a professional structure to meetings, with a specific agenda and a strict timeline, will greatly improve efficiency, energy and people's attitudes to the task.

Review how it's going: Have the changes worked? Are people sticking to the guidelines?

If you are feeling frustrated by the inefficient use of time, it's very probable that other people are too. It's important to assert yourself and let your frustrations and concerns be

known. With this simple risk-management structure, take the time to do an audit of your current situation. Write it down.

Identify your stress risks and the potential hazards to your wellbeing. When you are aware of your stressors, this is the first step to making the changes you need to lead a more productive life. Deal with one at a time. What are your stressors? Is it a particular time of year, maybe report writing, or is it the way a person speaks rudely to you? Maybe it's the lack of consultation in your school.

Assess the risks to your wellbeing – what is really happening to you? How do these situations make you feel? Frustrated, angry, depleted, powerless? What happens to your body and your mind because of this situation? Do you lose sleep, worry, become negative, judge, get headaches and back pain, or maybe drink more alcohol than you would like?

Control the risks to your wellbeing – remember, you have the power to control how you respond to what happens to you, but you cannot control what other people say or do. What can you do to minimise the impact this situation has on your life? What skills and strategies can you implement to maximise your wellbeing?

Review and evaluate how you are going, daily, weekly or monthly, depending on the situation. Take the time to do this. Invest in the changes you have made. Awareness and recognition of your progress is really important, so keep tabs on how you're going. If what you are doing isn't working, then maybe you'll have to change your approach. Keep trying until it works.

By making a definite decision to be aware of the risks to your wellbeing, you can begin to build the skills to help minimise the effects of stressful situations. You are more in control and on the road to building a powerful life. Your wellbeing will be the winner!

Developing the skills of resilience is a great way of building a structure for your wellbeing. It's like a buffer zone against the inevitable daily stressors. These skills include: training your mind like you train your body, learning the skills of optimism,



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and choosing how you respond to what happens to you.

Being aware of the potential stressors in your life, you can choose to learn some skills and strategies to deal with them. Developing your resiliency skills is an important investment for your long-term wellbeing.

Learning optimism

Our brain has the power to promote both positive and negative thoughts. What we say to ourselves and how we see ourselves is a strong determinant in our level of wellbeing and resilience. Unfortunately, we mostly put ourselves down. We may say to ourselves, 'I'm hopeless,' 'I'm fat,' 'I can't cope' and so on until we reach the stage where these thoughts can permeate our whole life if we let them.

Let's face it, there are enough people in the world to deplete us if we let them, so why do we do it to ourselves as well? Every time we react to a situation we are subconsciously bringing all 'the stuff' of our past into that thought or reaction. All our successes, failures, family, friends, mistakes and disappointments get swept up into the mix of who we are today and how we respond to what happens to us. And when we believe our thoughts, our self-image is created, determining our level of confidence and self-esteem. This is a very powerful force. How you think will determine how you feel.

If someone said you were useless, hopeless and a loser, would you believe them? It's probable that you'd use all your power to fight back and denounce everything they said about you and stick up for your successes and qualities. Yet when your mind tells you a similar thing you very often believe it, get seduced by the negativity and let it consume your being. This is a habit that depletes your wellbeing, but it can be controlled. Your thoughts can be changed so that they embellish your wellbeing, rather than deplete it. But it's very easy to sink into negativity. By doing this you are relinquishing your power and allowing your pessimism to overcome you.

Negativity can manifest both physically and mentally. Our bodies are good indica-

tors of our thought processes. Common symptoms of lack of control of our thoughts can possibly manifest in back pain, headaches, loss of appetite or insomnia. They are all physical manifestations of what is happening inside our brains. Because the immune system is connected to the brain through hormones, thought processes can directly affect a person's wellness. When people are persistently negative they develop more illness than those who are optimistic – as Martin Seligman explains in *Learned Optimism*, it has been proven that pessimists are more susceptible to infectious diseases and visit the doctor more often.

Although you don't have to be optimistic all the time, knowing you have the power to switch from a negative to a positive thought is energising and helps avoid a downward spiral. You have the power to do this.

Creating a wellbeing structure to keep yourself safe

It's easy in a busy school day to be swept along, doing the urgent things that need to be done; however, when something happens that causes you negative stress, you can choose to manage it.

The first thing to do is to take the time to reflect. Simply stop and ask yourself: 'What is happening to me and why am I feeling this way?' Listen to the signals in your body and mind. Are you starting to feel anxious, annoyed or frustrated? Take a moment to 'press pause' and consider your response by trying to understand why this situation is affecting you this way. It may only take a minute, and each day has 1,440 minutes. If you value your wellbeing, then surely you can allow a few minutes each day to reflect. When you have understood what is happening, then you can choose what your response will be.

In more extreme situations, some people also have a sense of helplessness in life. They give up and let other people's agendas and needs determine how they feel and what they do. Being a quitter and blaming other people can become such a bad habit that to find the effort and energy to pursue their

own life is beyond them. They believe that nothing they do matters, so they simply give up. This type of person will always live in someone else's shadow and feel powerless. This is a perfect recipe to increase stress, to deplete wellbeing and drain resilience.

One of Martin Seligman's key theories is that an individual's sense of personal control can determine their fate. We know that you have the power to train your mind like your body, so the first step is to determine what you are thinking at any given time. When faced with a stressful situation ask yourself three questions: is it permanent; is it pervasive; and is it personalised?

Think of your responses to the following situation. What would you feel and do? It's a busy time of year, you have reports to write, parent-teacher interviews to prepare and classes to teach. You only have one hour free on this particular day to try and fit things in. As you check the timetable in the morning on the way to class, you see that you've been given an extra for the one period you had free. You feel really angry, put upon and undervalued. 'Why me?' you loudly declare in the staffroom as you storm out.

Okay, let's face it, in schools, extras are part of life. Everyone gets one at some stage, but you can't see that at this moment. All you can think about is what you need to get done today and the lack of time to do it. Your thoughts churn through your head, and you start to get really annoyed, thinking you've been picked on during a day when you can least afford the time.

Gaining perspective in a stressful situation is very important and a practical brake on a downward spiral of negativity. This is when you need to tap into your personal power and 'press pause' to understand why you are reacting in this way. Remember those three questions.

Is this a permanent state of affairs? Instinctively, you could react to the extra work and say to yourself, 'This always happens to me,' in which case you'll succumb to a negativity that will affect your existing classes and how you manage your whole day. Alternatively, you could breathe deeply,

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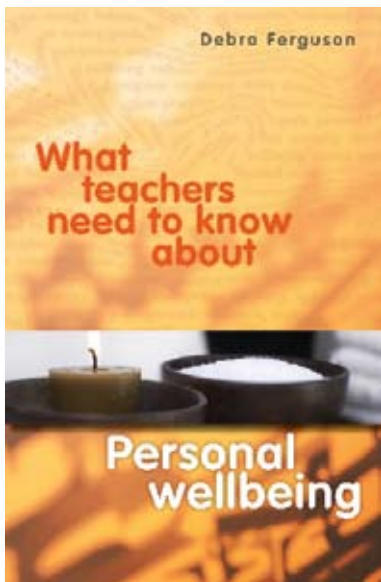
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At a glance

- Your level of resilience determines your strength to cope when times are tough.
- You are responsible for your well-being.
- You can control how you respond to what happens to you.
- You have the power to make changes in your life and to move from your comfort zone into your courage zone.
- You can train your mind like you train your body.
- If the norm has been disrupted and your wellbeing is diminished, you need to make changes.
- You have the power to switch your negative thoughts to positive ones.
- Invest in your resilience and wellbeing to enjoy the long-term benefits for yourself and all of your relationships.



pause and say to yourself, 'This is really annoying now, but I know I have to do it and I can still get my work done tomorrow.' This is where we can gain perspective with regard to the inevitable pressures of a school environment. You could say to yourself, 'It's only one hour and I'll cope.' Feeling helpless and angry is only a fleeting sense and then you can switch your thoughts and simply get on with what you have to do.

Knowing that something is not forever provides a sense of hope. Getting a handle on the permanence of a stressful situation will enable you to determine how long you choose to feel helpless, frustrated or annoyed. Understanding that all bad events are temporary in nature is a powerful means to build your resilience, gain perspective and boost your wellbeing.

Is it pervasive? What may be a small problem, like the extra, can very often get blown out of all proportion so that it ruins much of your day, evening at home and even sleep. You can let your mind take you to all the times when you felt undervalued, when you got extra work and when people took you for granted.

If you let them, these debilitating thoughts can pervade your life to the detriment of your relationships and everything else that is happening around you. What started as a small inconvenience becomes a catastrophe and your wellbeing is certainly depleted, as is your sense of control and power, and possibly your relationships.

Gaining perspective in a situation is crucial to building your resiliency and understanding that 'stuff happens.' A resilient mental attitude helps you to deal with it and move on. Ask yourself, in terms of, say, the 80 years that you will live, how much impact this one event will have on you. On a scale of zero to 10, at the time you might catastrophise and rate it as an eight. Is it, really, in terms of everything that life will throw at you? Invest in yourself in the short term and take a minute to create some space and realign your thoughts. Put the situation in its real place and then give it that amount of energy. Don't let the inevitable irritants

of each day sap your energy for the rest of the day. You have the choice.

Is it personalised? It's really easy to blame and we're generally very good at it, especially in a stressful situation. It can become either the other person's fault or our own. When we constantly blame ourselves for what has happened, our self-esteem plummets and it's difficult to retrieve perspective to get back on track. It can lead us into the spiral of negativity and sense of worthlessness. When we blame someone else for 'wrecking our whole day' we are negating any responsibility for our wellbeing, yet we have a powerful role in determining how much that situation is going to pervade our day. Take the time to appraise it, make the decision to deal with it and then move on.

Finding the balance between optimism and pessimism

In a world filled with ups and downs, we can't just naively go through life being continually optimistic and thinking everything is rosy. To lead a balanced and successful life that promotes wellbeing, we need a blend of optimism and pessimism. A small dose of pessimism gives us a sense of the reality of our situation, but it's our optimism that makes dreams and goals possible, giving us hope, a sense of purpose and an understanding of the larger context. Finding the balance between the two will enable us to take a rational view of any situation.

Try this challenge. Think of a situation where you find yourself sinking into negative thought processes. Take the time to pause and think about why you spiral into negativity. Ask yourself what has happened, so you can name the situation or behaviour of the other person. Ask yourself about your thoughts, then list them. For example, this always happens to me or I know who did this. Ask yourself how this makes you feel – frustrated, angry, helpless? Ask yourself what is happening to your body as a result of these feelings – heart palpitations, neck pain, back pain, loss of focus?

Take the time to gain perspective and think about how difficult the situation is for

you, on a scale from zero, not at all difficult, to 10, life-threatening. This allows you to normalise your thoughts, rationalise where your mind might be taking you, and put on the brakes to get the perspective to deal with it. Then ask yourself: is it permanent; is it pervasive; and is it personalised?

Reactions versus response

Many of us act impulsively out of habit. When something happens to us, like being verbally abused, we instinctively react. Reactions usually come from deep within us. They are determined by our past, our habits and our mood.

When a negative emotion comes to the front of your brain, take a moment to feel your power and dispute it. Being aware of what you are thinking and doing is the first step to becoming more powerful. Switching your brain to the positive will give a definite boost to your optimism, sense of humour and wellbeing. Learning to respond rather than react is a more elegant and mature way to deal with situations. It involves using the wisdom we all have to think about the consequences of what could happen and what we want to happen. You are in con-

trol of yourself, your emotions and your wellbeing.

Think about what you can do rather than being the victim of another person's behaviour or attitude. It's easy to fall into the trap of focusing your energy on the problem, rather than the solution. Take the time to ask yourself the hard questions: why this is happening to you now and why you are feeling this way.

To manage stressful situations, know that you can control them. You have the power and you have the choice to choose your response and build your resilience. **T**

Debra Ferguson is an education consultant and author who, as an experienced educator, understands the pressures and challenges teachers face on a daily basis. She is committed to promoting healthy and engaged workplaces, and for the past eight years has been training principals and teachers. Her presentations offer practical strategies to cope with the increasing personal and professional demands being placed on people, helping them to create and maintain healthy, balanced and productive lives. She is also

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This is an edited extract from her latest book, What Teachers Need to Know About Personal Wellbeing, published by ACER Press. ISBN 9 780 864 319 289. RRP \$24.95. For availability, visit <http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/product/A4050BK>

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FURTHER READING

Michael Licenblat has effective strategies to pressureproof yourself from stress by building resilience. To find out more, visit www.stressmanagementsuccess.com

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