“Adrienne and John have a great saying: ‘Life is difficult and that’s ok.’ Sometimes though it doesn’t feel like it’s ok, and if you have a senior position in an organization it can be difficult to realize this. By working through the ‘Keys’ in Coaching for Resilience you will equip yourself to deal with all of life’s challenges. Keep it with you.”

Peter Davidson, Chairman, South Tyneside NHS Trust

“It has made me challenge my outlook in a way that I can honestly say I have never had the tools to do before, despite reading numerous books on the subject.”

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Joan Didier, Deputy Head Teacher

In a hectic and constantly changing world, stress is a natural part of our daily lives. Although it is not possible to avoid some of the key stress factors, such as increasing pressure at work, demanding workloads and lack of job security, by building and maintaining your resilience you can learn how to cope with the stress effectively.

Coaching for Resilience will give you a deep understanding of resilience and the tools you need to build that crucial yet often elusive quality. Using tried and tested techniques it will show you how to motivate and inspire your clients and yourself to build greater resilience. Within you will find clear, detailed and structured explanations of the principles of positive psychology with practical exercises and examples to work through. Whether you are seeking to build your own personal resilience, or to help others to achieve that, this comprehensive resource will help you develop a clear understanding of the psychology of stress and develop your own strategies to enhance resilience.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adrienne practised for many years as a psychotherapist and psychotherapy supervisor within both private and National Health mental health care services. In particular she worked with people suffering with severe stress, anxiety and depression. Since then she has worked as a consultant, trainer and coach within both private and public sector organizations specializing in stress management, resilience building, management of change and conflict resolution. Adrienne is the author of Out of the blue: A practical guide to overcoming and preventing depression.

John was formerly head of the Employment Risk Consulting practice of Marsh UK, and advises many leading employers on health and employment issues. He has run the health care functions of Procter and Gamble and the Beecham Group. Together with Lord Robens he founded BMI Occupational Health. John was the founding Managing Director of Minerva Health Management and the Chairman of Marsh Health. His books include Looking After Corporate Health: A guide to protecting the health and productivity of people in the business environment, and Fast Track to the Top: 10 skills for career success.

Adrienne and John are the founding directors of Nice Work Consulting Ltd. Nice Work is a company that specializes in workplace psychology and employee well-being and provides consultancy, training and coaching services to many private sector companies, as well as public sector organizations including local authorities and NHS Trusts. Further information about Nice Work is available on the website www.niceworkconsulting.co.uk. You are also very welcome to contact the authors by e-mail at info@niceworkconsulting.co.uk.
So far we’ve been talking about ‘resilience’ and ‘stress’ as if we could take it for granted that we all mean the same things by those words. That isn’t necessarily the case. When we ask people in our groups to define resilience and stress, they often come up with meanings that are close to or the same as our own; but sometimes they are quite different, especially with the word ‘resilience’.

Obviously we will be making lots of suggestions about ‘managing stress’ and ‘building resilience’ throughout this book. If you have a different view from us about what we are trying to help you manage and build then you might find our approach a bit confusing. So before we go any further we should define exactly what we mean by these terms so that our goals and approach will make sense to you.

**Resilience**

1. **What is resilience?**

We’d like to give you a chance to think about your own definition of ‘resilience’ before we reveal the one that we are using for this book. You’ll find that ours is taken from a dictionary. But, rather than go to a dictionary right away yourself, it would be interesting to explore your own personal sense of what ‘resilience’ means.

To find your own definition it might help to think about people whom you would say are resilient. Could you name a famous person you regard as resilient?
Write their name here .................................................................

Could you name someone you know personally whom you think is resilient?
Write their name here .................................................................

Now write down a few words or short phrases that describe these people and why you think they are resilient.
......................................................................................
......................................................................................
......................................................................................
......................................................................................

We have found that the famous people most often named in this exercise are Margaret Thatcher and Nelson Mandela. The reason people give for pointing to Margaret Thatcher is that she was mentally and emotionally ‘strong’. She took tough decisions, stuck to her own views and was unmoved by criticism. The reason they give for identifying Nelson Mandela is that, despite many years of imprisonment and isolation, he came back with renewed energy and an inspirational vision for the future of his country.

You may not have named Mrs Thatcher or Mr Mandela specifically as your famous person, but did you write down any of the qualities above to describe them? People in our groups most commonly note either ‘strength’ or ‘the ability to bounce back’ as the key features of resilience. We would agree with one of these.

**Our definition of resilience**

In the strict dictionary definition of resilience, ‘strength’ is not the crucial aspect of resilience. Much more important is the ‘ability to bounce back’. In fact the definition from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is:

1. The act of rebounding or springing back; rebound, recoil.
2. Elasticity; the power of resuming the original shape or position after compression, bending etc.

This is what we mean when we talk about ‘resilience’ in this book. It is not the same as strength, which enables you to remain calm, unaffected, or ‘stony’ in the face of life’s difficulties and challenges. Rather it is that you are moved emotionally by those difficulties – you feel pain, anxiety, fear, sadness, even despair – and then can recover to your original state.

At its best resilience enables a person to recover to an even more resourceful state. This happens when the person can use a difficult experience to become more aware of their personal qualities, skills and abilities, and
is able to use those more readily and fully when they are challenged again in the future.

So it is possible for a person to be strong and yet not very resilient. A strong person is like a rock; hard, tough and unbending. That rock won’t be pushed or pulled out of shape by pressure, but hard knocks can chip away at it and once it is chipped it stays chipped. It might take a very powerful hit to break it completely but when it is broken it cannot put itself back together again. This is not our goal for you.

A person who is resilient may not appear to be very strong. That’s because they bend and give way. They react to what happens to them emotionally and physically. They are like an elastic band that can be pulled, stretched, twisted and scrunched – but then will go back to its original shape when it is let go.

Of course it is possible to break an elastic band. You could stretch it beyond its flexibility until it snaps, or pull at it repeatedly until it loses its elasticity and can be broken easily. In the same way, even very resilient people have their limits. The truth is that everyone can be broken by events that are beyond endurance for them.

Our goal is to work with you to build the power and toughness of your resilience. We want you to be like an elastic band that is extremely thick and strong so it will be very difficult for life to stretch you beyond your breaking point.

You might be pulled out of shape by life events. By this we mean you may become very emotional at times. You might need to seek help. Or you might need to withdraw and take some time out for a while. But then you will come back with new vitality and resolve, just like Nelson Mandela.

2. Where does resilience come from?

We touched on this question earlier when we explained our approach to building resilience. There we offered these possible answers:

- that people are born with it;
- that they develop it through experience or relationships over time;
- that it might be a combination of these two.

This is a question that psychologists are still exploring and, to be perfectly honest, we don’t know the answer. It might be in the genes and you have a set level of resilience at birth. But we know that, with time and experience, people change and they develop greater ability to recover from setbacks. We also know that people who are very resilient can be pulled and pushed by events to such an extent that they seem to give up and become unable to recover from difficult times – their elastic gets overstretched. So a person’s degree of resilience does seem to have more of a link with life experience. Perhaps it is a combination of genes and experience.

One possibility we haven’t considered yet is that resilience is learnt. We might be able to discover something about this by looking at another
psychological concept; depression. Depression seems to run in families so researchers used to believe that it was probably mostly genetic. But then some psychologists started to ask whether the reason it runs in families is not so much because of genes but more because it is being taught and learnt within those families. The idea is that children learn to react to life in a depressed way by watching and copying their depressed parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, etc.

So could it be that people who lack resilience learnt to be that way as children by copying inflexible, brittle attitudes and behaviour? Could it be that people who are very resilient learnt that by copying flexible, bounce-back types of attitudes and behaviour? Also, children respond very strongly to being rewarded and punished; praised or scolded. Perhaps resilient and non-resilient behaviour is learnt through this process too.

Where do you think you got your resilience (or lack of resilience) from?

Do you think that you were just born that way? Are you and other members of your family similar in ability to recover from misfortunes? Would you relate your levels of resilience to childhood learning or more to life experiences over time? Do you feel that your life experiences have led you to become more or less resilient over the course of your life? Has your ‘elastic’ been stretched so often that it has lost its springiness and ability to bounce back? Or has it become thicker and tougher?

Whatever your answers are to these questions, as we said in our introductory section, it isn’t possible for us to give you the quality of resilience by what we write in this book. We can’t give you the genes and we can’t give you the childhood relationships or life experiences that you would have needed to develop it over time.

However, we did suggest that there is another angle we can use to build resilience. We can help you to stop your resilience being undermined constantly until it is like that overstretched elastic band. Our theory is that the major factor that undermines resilience is stress. We can teach you how to manage stress in a powerful and long-lasting way so your resilience will be allowed to grow and strengthen.
Stress

What is stress?

Q. It is often said that a little bit of stress is a good thing. Do you think that is:

TRUE? or FALSE?

How you responded to that question is likely to depend on your view of what stress does to a person.

If you said TRUE, that’s probably because you believe stress gives people an adrenalin rush that helps them to be focused, motivated and up for a challenge. You might think people need that bit of stress to feel excited, to bring out their best performance, or maybe even just to get up in the morning. People who believe that a little bit of stress is a good thing are afraid that being ‘calm’ all the time would lead to apathy. They believe they might not be bothered to do anything because they just wouldn’t care.

If you said FALSE it’s likely to be because you feel that it is important to be motivated, energized and focused in your life, but that that’s different from being stressed. You believe that once a person becomes stressed then things have begun to become too much to deal with and the experience has started to become unpleasant and unhealthy.

At the risk of alienating a lot of readers at this very early stage of our book, we have to say we would agree with those who responded FALSE to our question.

We are completely in favour of people being full of energy, passionate and focused. We would agree that the buzz of an adrenalin rush helps people to rise to a challenge. We, too, don’t want people to be calm all the time. We want people to be able to get angry sometimes. There are lots of things to get angry about in life; injustice, poverty, war, discrimination, abuse, dishonesty, etc. If no one got angry about those things then nothing would change. We want people to be able to be sad. It would be unnatural and unhealthy not to grieve when you lose something that is precious to you. We also want people to be thrilled, excited and joyously happy when great things happen.

It is important to understand that stress isn’t the only experience that brings about the release of adrenalin. All of the emotions mentioned above happen with adrenalin, even the positive ones, and you don’t need to be stressed to feel them. In fact, all stress does is undermine positive emotions such as happiness and excitement and increase the pain of the more difficult emotions such as anger, sadness and grief. That’s because, wherever there is stress, there is an added ingredient. Our definition will reveal that ingredient.
**Our definition of stress**

As you can imagine, the definition provided by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* goes on for quite a few paragraphs to take into account all of the various contexts in which people use the word ‘stress’. The bit that is relevant to us is where it defines stress as:

> The overpowering pressure of some adverse force or influence.

For us, the important word in this definition is the word ‘overpowering’. Pressure is fine. In fact, when people say they think a little bit of stress is a good thing, it often turns out they mean a bit of pressure is a good thing. They mean it is pressure that gives them the buzz of challenge and excitement they need to be at their most effective. And we would absolutely agree with that.

However, in our definition, pressure becomes stress when that pressure has become overpowering. In other words, the pressure has become more than they can cope with. When that happens, the effects of the pressure on the person have become more negative than positive.

So, the definition we use when we present our courses is this:

> Stress is the condition experienced when someone perceives that they are unable to meet the demands placed upon them.

In other words:

> People get stressed when they have a sense that they are unable to cope.

These are different words from the dictionary definition, but the meaning is the same. Stress is not about being challenged or under pressure. It is about being unable to meet demands and unable to cope with that pressure.

So far so good? But there’s more.

There are other words in our definitions that we believe are even more important than the ones we’ve italicised. These other words are at the heart of the definition of stress that we use as the basis for our approach to managing stress.

Look at the definitions again and see if you can identify what those words are.

Underline or highlight them here before you read on.

> Stress is the condition experienced when someone perceives that they are unable to meet the demands placed upon them.

And in this one?

> People get stressed when they have a sense that they are unable to cope.

(The answers are on the next page so you wouldn’t see them before you selected the words yourself...)
Defining ‘Resilience’ and ‘Stress’

Did you identify these words?

Stress is the condition experienced when someone perceives that they are unable to meet the demands placed upon them.

In other words;

People get stressed when they have a sense that they are unable to cope.

The words ‘perceives’ and ‘sense’ are crucial here. A ‘perception’ or a ‘sense’ of something is not reality; or at least not necessarily reality. It is a personal, subjective experience of reality. It’s the way that someone sees something or thinks about something from their own point of view.

**Stress and perception**

There are three things you need to understand about perceptions and how they relate to stress:

1 Perceptions might be true reflections of how your world really is, and equally they might not be.
A person could become stressed because they sense that they are unable to cope and they are right; they truly are unable to cope. But equally they could become stressed if they sense that they can’t cope and they are wrong; they really can cope.

2 Perceptions can be conscious or unconscious.
You can be consciously aware of your sense of being overwhelmed, and you might even think or say out loud to yourself ‘I just can’t cope with this any more’. On the other hand, the perception of being unable to cope might happen at an unconscious level. Your brain might register your sense of being unable to cope before you can be consciously aware of that yourself. It may be that the first indication you have that you are stressed is one or more of the physical, emotional, behavioural or psychological symptoms of stress that we will discuss a bit later.

3 The perception of being unable to cope triggers FEAR.
Fear is the ‘added ingredient’ we mentioned earlier. Wherever there is stress there is fear, whether you are consciously aware of it or not.
What is that fear about? What are you afraid of when you have a sense that you are unable to cope? Is it that you will fall apart? That your world will crumble? That you will lose everything? Yes, it’s possible those are the kinds of thing you fear on a conscious level. But our understanding of stress is that it always starts at an unconscious level. Stress begins at the level of instinct, and that instinct is the instinct for survival. At that level the unconscious fear is that you won’t survive.
Fight-or-flight

When the brain perceives that you are unable to cope with a situation, it reacts instinctively (that means without your conscious awareness or choice) as though your life was being threatened. As far as your instinct for survival is concerned, being unable to cope is as much a threat to your life as a physical attack would be, and that instinct for survival reacts in the same way to both – with the fight-or-flight response.

To explain how and why this happens we need to show you how the fight-or-flight response comes about. The next chapter will take you on a brief tour of the inside of the brain. We know you might be tempted to skip this bit if scientific explanations look a bit daunting to you. Please do stay with it though, because what we explain next is crucial background to the 7 KEYS. It really is quite simple, and we’re sure you’ll be able to identify with the descriptions and examples.
In a hectic and constantly changing world, stress is a natural part of our daily lives. Although it is not possible to avoid some of the key stress factors, such as increasing pressure at work, demanding workloads and lack of job security, by building and maintaining your resilience you can learn how to cope with the stress effectively.

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