

resilience

**the 5 threats to resilience and
performance that career driven
professionals must avoid**

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introduction

Any career driven professional is motivated to work efficiently and productively. Unfortunately there are many things that conspire against this. Deadlines, interruptions and other external demands can easily disrupt our ability to complete important tasks. Often this creates internal blocks that affect our resilience and performance.

So how do we cope? We can't always control the external environment, but that doesn't mean that we have to succumb to feelings of stress and allow our performance to wilt.

this report looks at:

- The common issues that get in the way of productivity
- How these issues threaten our resilience and performance
- How to avoid these issues and the performance benefits of doing so

You may recognise that some of these threats to resilience and performance are more relevant to you than others. Even if some of these issues are less relevant to you personally, you may be aware of how they are affecting those around you. Awareness of how to address these issues will enhance necessary workplace skills, especially if you have a supervisory or management role.

what is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to spring back or resume an original state. It's an engineering term. In the work context, it is about recognising when we have been knocked off balance, and then knowing how to re-balance ourselves. When we know how to do that, it has an impact on our health, vitality, productivity and general performance.

the five threats to resilience

Here are five common factors that have a huge impact on your productivity and performance. You may notice that one issue that may affect you, or others, has not been mentioned. There is a reason for this, and it will be addressed at the end of the report.

1. futile frustrations

Futile frustrations are when frustration does not help or change the situation. Perhaps you are stuck in traffic, or in a lengthy meeting that you don't feel is relevant to you. It's beyond your control, so any frustration is completely futile.

If you are stuck in traffic, it is all too easy to respond by feeling annoyed, frustrated and stressed. Does this help in any way? Clearly not, and yet for some people this is their standard reaction. Yet how often do people say: "I wish I had ten minutes to have a sit down and do nothing, or to listen to the radio"? Now is your chance. Often people will respond by saying: "That's easier said than done. I'm feeling stressed. I can't just switch that off". In order to understand this comment, it is important to acknowledge that the more we repeat a behaviour, the better we get at initiating frustration and stress. In essence, whatever we practice, we get good at, regardless of whether it is a useful or unhelpful behaviour.

If you know that you are going to have to work late, you also know rationally that feeling frustrated isn't that useful. Yet it is all too easy to respond in this way. The effects of these feelings will be discussed in this report, but for now just consider that when we feel frustrated and irritated, this can impair clear, rational thinking and reduce our productivity and efficiency. The consequence of this is that we end up working for longer and feel more drained than we would have had we remained calm and focussed.

2. procrastination

Most people experience procrastination. We've got something we know we have to do, yet we put it off, for a variety of reasons, including thinking it will be boring, difficult, take too long or isn't important enough. Often when we finally tackle it, it turns out that the task was far more straightforward than we imagined. Therein lies

the solution, which we will come back to, but for now, consider that procrastinating can be a drain on our resources; especially our energy, our vitality and our focus. Procrastinating can also contribute to the next threat to our efficiency and productivity.

3. feeling overwhelmed

The reality for most employees today is that there is simply too much to do. It is easy to feel overwhelmed. You know that even if you work hard and are totally focussed, you will still leave work with more to do tomorrow. Feeling overwhelmed can lead to paralysis. We feel stressed and can't seem to make a start. Time passes with little to show for it. For some people, this means leaving work with a sense of dissatisfaction. You don't feel that you have achieved everything that you had intended to. This can lead to feelings of demoralisation.

4. perfectionism

Perfectionism is setting excessively high standards, being overly self-critical, taking things too seriously, and needing to be right. These behaviours simply add stress to our lives.

If you are a computer programmer then you have to write code correctly, otherwise it doesn't work properly. However trying to achieve perfection in other areas of work is often inappropriate. Even if you work in an environment where the standard of work expected is very high, some people are not very good at discerning when they have done a good enough job.

So what makes someone strive for perfection? There are a number of reasons including:

- **Believing that we will gain feelings of self worth by being perfect**
- **Avoiding criticism/disapproval**
- **Avoiding making mistakes**

5. ignoring performance issues

Are you experiencing poor sleep, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and an inability to relax? Are you experiencing health issues such as regular colds, digestive problems, or persistent fatigue? These are signs that tell us that something is wrong. These can be signs of stress, and these issues may cause long-term problems if not addressed.

Some people make the mistake of thinking that nothing will help and do not look for solutions. Other people resort to using sticking plasters such as medication, alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Drugs for anxiety, insomnia and depression should be used as a short-term measure. The effectiveness of antidepressants has, for instance, been questioned in several recent studies.

understanding stress

The question you may be thinking is: *“Why is it important to avoid these behaviours? Sure, they’re unhelpful, but they’re not that serious are they?”*

In order to understand the significance of these issues, we need to have a good understanding of stress, what it is, and how it affects us.

what is stress?

Stress is the body’s reaction to a change that requires a response, a response that re-establishes a normal state of functioning. The stimulus could be a change in temperature, an emotional shock, or the body responding to a virus.

For this report, we can think of stress as being any time our thoughts, feelings, internal dialogue or internal images activate the Fight or Flight mechanism, also known as the stress response. This mechanism evolved to protect our ancestors when in a threatening situation; perhaps being faced with a sabre toothed tiger or invaders.

People often think of stress as being the really big stuff, when we are really stressed. The subject of how stress affects our wellbeing has been the study of Professor Sapolsky of Stanford University. He has written a book called, ‘Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers’.

Professor Sapolsky explains that if we think of a spectrum where at one end we have extreme Fight or Flight and at the other end we have Rest and Digest. Think of a zebra fleeing from a hungry lion. That’s Fight or Flight. Then think about lying on a beach or by a pool, sipping a cold drink and reading a book by your favourite author. Unless it’s a spine chilling horror fantasy, your body is going to be in a relaxed state called Rest and Digest. In the middle of the spectrum is homeostasis, which is a state of normal functioning.

There are two possible outcomes when a lion is chasing a zebra. Ultimately, either the zebra is killed, or it escapes and lives. Whilst the zebra is running in fear of its life, it’s body releases powerful hormones to help it run away.

If it gets away, the zebra will recover from the episode, and the body achieves homeostasis. When the zebra is relaxing in the sun, physiologically it will be in a more relaxed state.

However zebras don't think about all the frequent smaller stressors that humans do, for instance:

- The reaction you have when you receive a call from a difficult client
- Receiving an email pointing out a mistake that you made
- Saying to your self: "Oh no, I forgot to attach the attachment to the email. What an idiot! What will my client think of me?"
- Missing a train
- Saying something embarrassing to your boss

Professor Sapolsky explains that all these stressors cumulatively add up and can cause all sorts of health issues. The reason that zebras don't get ulcers is that they don't experience all these intermittent stress events. What makes us different to zebras is our ability to anticipate or reflect on a threat. Essentially any unhelpful thought, feeling, dialogue or image activates the Fight or Flight response.

how does stress effect us?

Every time the Fight or Flight mechanism is activated, hormones including adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into the bloodstream. These activate dramatic physical changes in the body, affecting our:

energy

Our body converts energy stores to blood sugar, and we use energy less efficiently if we are frequently and unnecessarily switching on this stress response. When the Fight or Flight mechanism is activated, the body stops laying down energy stores.

thinking

Rational thinking is suppressed, and reactive emotional thinking takes over.

digestion

The digestive system is affected with blood diverted from the digestive tract to the limbs. If this happens regularly, then we do not digest and utilise food efficiently. In the long term, this can result in digestive issues, such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or ulcers.

sleep

We experience light or interrupted sleep. If the brain thinks that we are under threat, then we won't experience deep refreshing sleep, where vital repair functions are carried out.

immune system

The Immune System is suppressed. We are three times more likely to get a cold when stressed, according to research¹.

how often is the Fight or Flight mechanism activated?

In modern life, there are many triggers that we can interpret as being a threat which then activate the Fight or Flight mechanism. For instance:

- Seeing the boss walk into the room in a bad mood
- Knowing that you have to talk to an obnoxious client
- Looking at your to do list
- Leaving the house later than you intended to and rushing for the train

In essence, every time our thoughts, feelings, internal dialogue or internal images activate the Fight or Flight mechanism, we are creating stress in our body. There is another issue at stake here, that was mentioned earlier. The more often we repeat a behaviour, the better we get at generating this response. Consequently it becomes easy to respond to situations that are not actually life threatening in unhelpful ways.

If you consider that there are 86,400 seconds in a day, there are a lot of opportunities for unhelpful thoughts. And this can have a profound effect on energy levels, our general health, clarity of thought, and other key functions.

¹ Stress and the common cold: Cohen, S., Tyrrell, D., and Smith, A., "Psychological stress and susceptibility to the common cold"
New England Journal of Medicine 325 (1991)

solutions for boosting resilience and performance

Having identified some of the most common threats to resilience and performance, and looked at how they affect us physiologically, let us look at some solutions.

1. futile frustrations

It is important to be able to differentiate between those things that we can and cannot influence. If we get frustrated about the weather, the traffic, or the train not arriving on time, then we are allowing our state of mind to be highly influenced by things that are beyond our control.

The Serenity Prayer states: *“Grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

So the next time you make a mistake, think about how long you want to dwell on it. It has happened, you can't change it. Remind yourself that:

- There isn't anyone on the planet that hasn't at some point made a mistake
- The reality is that at some point, you will stop dwelling on it. The question is “how quickly do you want to get to the point where you draw the line and move on?”
- High performers just don't dwell on mistakes. They get on and make the most of their day

As the Serenity Prayer suggests, it is vital to put our energy into the things that we can influence.

2. procrastination

In order to solve procrastination, you could adopt these strategies:

step 1 - identify your thinking

We need to be clear on the effect that a task is having on us. Namely as we contemplate a task, what feelings do we notice? Is it a sense of dread, lack of motivation, or despair? We need to identify what we are thinking; what thoughts are we having and what are we saying to ourselves that generates these feelings. It may be:

- “This is too difficult”
- “This is going to be boring”

If you can't identify the thought, then a good strategy is to guess. Ask yourself: *"What might I be thinking that generates these feelings?"*

step 2 - remind yourself of previous successes

Let's say you are feeling a sense of dread and are thinking that it's going to be too difficult. Now ask yourself: "When was the last time I felt this, and did I get the task done?" Recognise that you found a solution before, and can do again.

step 3 - decide to complete the task

Ask yourself: "Do I really want to have this incomplete task hanging over me?" Having incomplete tasks can drain us. Every time we think of that job we haven't done, we can end up feeling demotivated. So get the task done.

step 4 - focus on the end result

Focus on the end result and how you will feel when the task is done. This is a good motivator. For instance if you are procrastinating about doing some housework, then thinking about how it will look and how nice it will be to have a clean house, will spur you on. No matter how sophisticated people are, they still get satisfaction from getting something done.

step 5 - commit a block of time

Another strategy to help with procrastination is to decide to spend a fixed amount of time on the task/project; for instance to decide to spend an hour on the task, to get the ball rolling, then have a break or do something else. Estimate how long the task will take to complete and schedule time blocks to come back to the task. People often under-estimate how long a task will take. Pay attention to the accuracy of your estimation.

3. feeling overwhelmed

Part of the strategy for dealing with feelings of being overwhelmed is similar to dealing with procrastination.

It's useful to do a reality check. The reality for most busy people is that there will always be more work to do than there is time. So the first step is to prioritise. A simple system is to write a list of what you need to do today. You can also do this for the week and month. Once you have written a list, think about how long you think the task will take. Now order the task in terms of priority, taking into account any deadlines. You may class tasks in terms of A (high priority), B (medium priority), and C (low priority).

Now decide which task you are going to tackle, and ask your self: “What is the first step?” Then ask yourself: “What is the next step?” If someone gave you an pig to eat, (if you are a vegetarian, imagine someone gave you a huge vegetable to eat) you wouldn't try and eat it in one go. You would break it down into smaller chunks. You might take some to the butchers to make some sausages, burgers and steaks. You might throw a dinner party, give some of the meat away, and put some in the freezer. It's the same with tasks. If we break a task down into smaller chunks, then it becomes manageable.

4. perfectionism

A useful first step in dealing with perfectionism is to identify our feelings and the thoughts that are creating those feelings. We need to evaluate whether what we are saying to ourselves is true or useful. We need to recognise that by trying to be perfect we can spend too much time on something and with ever diminishing returns on the time and effort we put into the task.

Pareto's Law- the 80/20 rule, states that people generally produce 80% output in 20% of the time. In essence, we spend another 80% of our time trying to eek out another 20%. So what if we recognised when we had done a good enough job? We would free up an enormous amount of time to work on other projects, to deliver better value to our firm and our clients.

An example of this is when someone does a piece of work, and reads it over many times. They sit on it for a day or two, and read it again several times before finally sending the letter/email/article, having not added any further value. In this case it would be useful to limit the number of re-reads, and set a reasonable deadline for completion of the task.

We can hugely increase our productivity by recognising when we have done a good enough job.

5. ignoring performance issues

When people ignore their feelings of stress and being overwhelmed, they can manifestly affect their performance in the work environment. This can lead to poor sleep, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and an inability to relax. The cause of these must be addressed, otherwise it can also lead to health issues such as regular colds, digestive problems and fatigue. In order for the root cause to be addressed, people need to understand that change is possible and that they can overcome any blocks to change.

Commonly, people don't take steps to resolve issues as they:

- Think that nothing will help
- Have a fear of failure
- Think that it will be too difficult

These are all thinking patterns that keep people stuck. It is important to address this limiting thinking before people can successfully make the changes they need. When people decide to train with us, these are things that we work on with them to get them ready to make change as quickly and easily as possible.

Often, people don't achieve the results that they want because they haven't been given the right tools.

so what are the benefits of avoiding the 5 threats?

If we avoid switching on the Fight or Flight mechanism, or if we learn how to switch it off when it has been activated, then it has these positive effects:

Energy

- We use energy steadily and deposit stores of energy

Thinking

- We are able to think creatively and with clarity

Digestion

- The digestive system works optimally

Sleep

- We achieve deep and refreshing sleep, also known as delta or third level sleep, where important repair functions are carried out

Immune System

- The immune system is allowed to do its job

summary

So you should now understand how these threats to resilience can affect your performance and can in the long term compromise your health and wellbeing. At the beginning we mentioned that there was one common threat that we weren't focusing on specifically in this report. This particular issue is worry.

worry

Worry is often going to show up in relation to the issues already discussed in the report. If you are a perfectionist you may be worrying about what people think. If you are feeling overwhelmed, you may be worrying that you haven't got enough time to do everything you need to do, and that you may get in trouble if you don't keep on top of your workload.

However, if worry is something that significantly affects your day-to-day life, this is beyond the scope of this report and is the kind of issue that we would help people to address in a one-to-one session or during our resilience training programmes.

comments

We'd like to know how helpful you found this report.

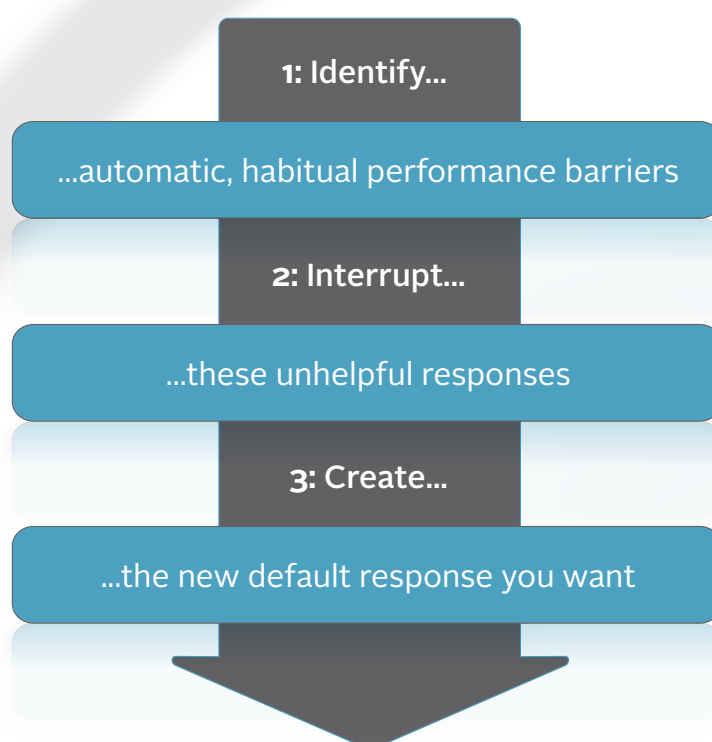
Do feel free to contact us to share your thoughts.

next steps

Resilience delivers introductory talks and training programmes to companies and firms.

These programmes teach career driven professionals a series of techniques that deal with challenging situations in useful ways. The programmes ensure that these professionals can be at their most effective every day.

The training encompasses three key factors:



individuals

Are the issues discussed in this report affecting you? Contact us **here** for a free consultation. Feel free to pass on this report to HR personnel.

organisations

Contact us **here** to book a meeting to find out more about the introductory talks we deliver that help individuals identify the threats to resilience and performance, and the training solutions we offer.

what clients have to say about our training

rob

"I really enjoyed the talk - it was very well presented, engaging, interesting, particularly the part regarding how the brain becomes conditioned to excel at something (the example of anxiety I can relate to) and a good example of the power of the positive was perfectly illustrated to me as when I left I was buzzing!"

laura, a tv director

"I was concerned if I worried less that the end product would be proportionately less good, but in fact choosing to stop stressing so much freed up energy that I've subsequently been able to put to far more productive use! ...

When I'm disciplined in my use of it (the training) I'm happier, better at my job and a far more capable manager of others."

natalie, solicitor

"Completing the training was a real eureka experience. The invaluable lesson I have learnt is that we always have choices with our thought patterns and we are in control.

The training has provided me with practical tools to cope in challenging situations, whether at work or in daily life.

I now appreciate the importance of being compassionate towards myself and have a more positive outlook having completed the training."

about us

Resilience is a Partnership founded by Eamonn Driscoll and Simon Pimenta.

Eamonn was an Army Captain, and then spent 12 years working in the City as a Client Originator.

Simon's background is in the Charitable Sector, including four years as the Director of a Housing Trust.

Both Eamonn and Simon found their health compromised by the demands of their jobs and it was only when they discovered a pioneering approach to resolving health issues that they quickly got back their health.

They now train others using these techniques.

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