

Fostering resilience in the medical community

No-one entered medical training because they thought it would be an easy career. We knew it was a lot of studying, then further extended postgraduate training. We knew we would be dealing with stressful, emotionally draining situations; we knew it would be disruptive to our social lives and our circadian rhythm.

There is an assumption that doctors are able to deal with physically, intellectually and emotionally demanding jobs and have the inbuilt resilience to deal with setbacks in their professional life: exam failures and re-takes, rejection, continuous assessment, research, teaching, audit, as well those presented on a daily basis by their job. The changes in the NHS, in the training schemes, and now more recently the dispute over the junior doctor contract mean there is now more need than ever for our medical staff to build greater levels of resilience.

There is much written on training and developing resilience in the general workplace and particularly in higher management, but little aimed specifically at doctors. Most senior management training programmes will have sessions dedicated to resilience and the ability to deal with setbacks, yet medical schools and postgraduate training programmes generally do not. Should we be giving our doctors the tools to deal with their setbacks, disappointment, criticism, and sense of failure during their training?

There is a strong body of research that has identified the core components in building optimal resilience which is referred to here, with a specific focus on how doctors can

adopt these practices to support their own resilience and wellbeing. So what are the strategies that doctors (and other health-care professionals) can employ to increase their resilience?

Build strong social networks

In the midst of challenges and pressure at work, nothing is more critical to our success than staying connected to the people around us. Yet when the pressure gets dialled up, a common reaction is all too often to withdraw and try to go it alone, and as a result we end up isolated and overwhelmed.

Building a supportive network of friends and colleagues who understand you and will empathize with you is probably one of the most important ways doctors can stay resilient. Having people you can call on when in difficulty, having colleagues who will cover for you, swap shifts and help out is vital in a high pressure job when most are balancing this with family and social commitments. This works best when the whole team is flexible with each other, fostering a mutual supportive network allowing all members of the team to combine their non-work and work lives to the best effect.

Resilient doctors hold tighter to their social support in times of pressure. Instead of retreating they lean towards their colleagues, friends and loved ones. Not only are these doctors happier, but they are more productive, engaged and have more energy available to them and their patients and colleagues.

Reframing setbacks

Being positive after a setback can be difficult. Doctors are typically high achievers; they are used to performing well in exams, being successful at interview, and delivering day-to-day tasks to a high standard. Insight is an essential quality for a good doctor, but that insight can easily derail us when we have setbacks, either clinically or academically. Healthy self-reflection can turn into self-criticism leading to feelings of failure, worthlessness and guilt.

The ability to respond to these events in a positive, constructive way while still learning from setbacks and improving practice will improve performance and work satisfaction. People who have an optimistic mindset tend to look first for what is right in people, situations, plans and projects and tend to hold a belief that in the vast majority of cases, things will work out for the best. It is also a skill that can be learned and cultivated by consciously choosing more helpful thoughts and beliefs about adverse events.

Understanding and applying your strengths

Conventional wisdom has frequently sold us the myth that in order to grow and develop to our fullest capabilities we must actively focus on rectifying our weaknesses.

For years we have been conditioned by our education systems, workplaces and even well-intentioned parents to focus on correcting our deficiencies and areas for development. There are false assumptions within this that people achieve success in the same way and that we can all be well-rounded performers in all aspects of everything we do. In actual fact, research has shown that people's area of greatest potential and growth actually lies within their areas of strength – not in correcting weaknesses (Rath and Conchie, 2008).

Our strengths are the underlying qualities that energise us and contribute to our optimal development and our best performance. Typically when we are using our strengths we feel more engaged and immersed in our work experiencing what psychologists refer to as a state of 'flow'. We also tend to feel more authentic – like the real 'us' – and tend to want to contribute more because it is energising and fulfilling work. Concentrating on improving weaknesses is draining, and can lead to feelings of helplessness if you are at a psychological low ebb. Being able to articulate your strengths and apply these more actually strengthens you, boosts self-confidence to overcome life challenges and allows a more optimistic mindset to develop.

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Taking good care of yourself

The mind and the body are not two separate entities. They are inextricably linked and having a healthy mind requires a person to take care of him-/herself both mentally and physically. The shift pattern of doctors can be extremely disruptive, preventing a decent sleep routine, leading to skipping meals, and not allowing a good exercise routine to develop. It requires discipline and organization to keep healthy when not only in a full-time job, but also with the pressures of research, CV buffing and educational activities that most doctors undertake in their free time.

Personal experience has taught us that being too busy to have lunch has an entirely counterproductive effect, leading to unhealthy snacking, and being less productive in the afternoon. Take time to have lunch, to exercise, to wind down, and get a decent night's sleep.

There is a growing body of evidence that techniques such as mindfulness can not only help provide a healthy mindset for a stressful job, but can change the way our brain functions. Studies show that in the minutes right after meditating, we experience feelings of calm and contentment, as well as a raised awareness and empathy. Research even shows that regular meditation can permanently rewire the brain to raise levels of happiness, lower stress, and even improve immune function (Shapiro et al, 2005).

Identify the things you can control and influence

There will be a lot of things wrong in the average doctor's working life. Trying to change all of them is soon overwhelming. How we experience the world is shaped largely by our perceptions and interpretations of events and triggers. The most successful

people, in work and in life, are those who have what psychologists call an 'internal locus of control', the belief that their actions affect their outcomes. People with an external locus, on the other hand, are more likely to see daily events as steered by external forces, outside of their control.

Research has shown that these 'internals' who believe that they can work from their zone of influence have greater career achievement, and are much happier at work. This internal mindset also lowers job stress and leads to higher motivation and commitment to the organization. So concentrating on the things you can change and influence will gain you immense satisfaction, and fuel a positive upward spiral when you start to see the direct impact of your actions leading to these successful outcomes.

Energy efficiency and productivity

Your psychological energy is valuable. Recognizing when you have high amounts of it and using those times as productively as possible allows you to maximize your efficiency and creativity. The satisfaction you gain from working when you have a good amount of motivation is much higher than when you feel drained and are forcing yourself to do the work you need to do. We still need the discipline of being able to do necessary tasks when we are feeling drained, but we need to identify and enjoy the times we are energised by work.

Doctors need resilience. We assume this is either innate or infused into us during our demanding medical training. We assume it can not be taught and if we find ourselves in a non-resilient situation we have failed. Resilience can be taught. We can improve our mindset to deal with the inevitable setbacks of our career. When should the training start? Is medical school too early? Do we have to

KEY POINTS

- Fostering psychological resilience allows us to deal better with setbacks and the emotional drain of medicine.
- Reframing setbacks in a positive way and keeping physically and emotionally healthy allows us to stay resilient in difficult times.
- Specific psychological techniques may improve our ability to deal with difficult situations.

have experienced some of the setbacks of our working lives as doctors before we can fully take this training on board?

This training should start at medical school, but the main focus should be during the trainee years. This is the time when doctors change jobs constantly, have the highest incidence of setbacks, as well as having young children, not feeling in control of their careers and doing the most unsocial shift patterns. This is the time they need resilience the most and the time where it will make them more productive and improve their satisfaction in what is a great career. **BJHM**

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 Shapiro SL, Schwartz GER, Santerre C (2005) Meditation and positive psychology. In: Snyder CR, Lopez SJ, eds. *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press, New York: 632–45

Further reading

Achor S (2010) *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance At Work*. Crown Business, New York
 Harter JK, Schmidt FL, Hayes TL (2002) Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *J Appl Psychol* 87(2): 268–79 (doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.87.2.268)

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