

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL: USING OUR INNER RESOURCES TO REMAIN RESILIENT

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In the short space of a few weeks, our world has changed. We have had to alter fundamentally the way we live, our engagement in the world, our working practices and our social interactions.

All of us, in one way or another, are experiencing a varying range of emotions, from stress and anxiety to loneliness and vulnerability. However, there are psychological tools and tips that are worth our harnessing, which may just help us to navigate our way through this time of crisis more calmly and effectively.

The concept of psychological capital grew out of the field of positive psychology and organisational behaviour over the past decade. It relates to the psychological resources we have all developed, over our lifetimes, from experience and wisdom, that enable us to function, to remain responsive and resourceful, to find positivity, and to adapt in times of hardship. This is particularly pertinent now, when we are experiencing everything from cognitive dissonance to financial pressure, doubt and disorientation to loss of control, during these extraordinary and worrying times. Accessing the fortitude we require to navigate a deep and widespread crisis of this nature requires a level of calm and resilience that is exceptional in most of our lifetimes.

Psychological capital comprises four elements, which we can work on separately or together, and which – sometimes surprisingly – can lift mood and build our capacity to withstand stress and pressure. They are easy to remember, and to draw on, using the HERO acronym - Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism:

1. **HOPE:** Devise real goals that will build willpower and provide a sense of achievement. At times of exceptional difficulty, we need to develop both short and longer-term goals that will bring meaning, motivate us and give us a sense of purpose. This process, and the actioning of those goals, increases our belief that we have the flexibility to adapt and to find a way forward, as circumstances continue to change beyond our control.

2. **EFFICACY** through confidence: While low confidence can slow down effective and resilient behaviours, healthy confidence triggers action. Recognising our strengths helps us to grow our confidence even in challenging times, which is hugely important in empowering us to act and make change. We can do this by reflecting on our inner capabilities, the things we are good at in practical or emotional ways, in order to identify how we can help ourselves and others around us, in whatever ways are necessary.

3. **RESILIENCE:** Be proactive in maintaining connection and collaborating with colleagues, friends and family, acknowledging the things we are grateful for, sharing our difficulties and being compassionate with others. We should seek to work together in navigating the unknown and overcoming our challenges. This helps to build resilience by reducing our isolation, combatting loneliness and invigorating us through positive connection.

4. **OPTIMISM** to balance our realism: While it is important to prepare for worst-case scenarios, the problem with focussing only on fearful thoughts is that it can be paralysing and dominate our mindset. It is important to balance this realism with exploring opportunities, possibilities for learning and new skills which may lead to a better future. Of course we must all plan to deal with real difficulties if they arise, but we should look alongside this at how we can change our behaviours and our outlook, and to focus on the good that can emerge for others and for ourselves, for our teams, our society and our future.

These four inner resources have been shown in psychological studies to have significant impact on attitudes, behaviours, performance and wellbeing, to enable us to keep ourselves, our colleagues, and those around us, positive, responsive, agile and effective.

There are of course many other useful tips to help us remain robust, and to combat stress, frustration and anxiety:

- Create a 'worry window' of an hour or so a day, perhaps split into morning and evening, to stop the overwhelm of distressing and worrying news from around the world. This includes limiting our diet of news: turn off news notifications and choose the time you feel robust enough to read the coverage you want to read.
- Maintain a routine to each day, differentiating between weekday and weekend, and limiting unwanted distractions (social media, news feeds) during time carved out for home working.
- Distract yourself – without feeling bad about it. It is important to allow ourselves the pleasure of total distraction from the worry and stress, and from work outside our remote working times, without feeling guilty about taking time off.

- Have good conversations. Try Zoom, or Google Hangouts, or FaceTime or other ways of properly speaking with colleagues, friends and family for non-work conversations. Share your own experiences and personal feelings about how this time is affecting you. Listen to others, and be compassionate.
- Do something for someone else. Reach out to people on their own or in difficulty. Look out for elderly neighbours and people in your community who may need help. Social media offers some ideas for local support networks. Small acts of kindness go a long way, and helping others builds self-esteem and positive emotions.
- Exercise – take care of body and health, making time for exercise in whatever way is possible, and for healthy eating.
- Seek out humour, even in these dark times. A trite observation perhaps, but humour boosts the spirit and lifts the mood. There is also some scientific evidence that humour and laughter may influence health and boost immune function.

Wishing everyone well.

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