**How can I cope better with stress?**

*Some people can bounce back from life’s pressures, but others do not seem to have the capacity. Can anything help them to strengthen their emotional armour?*

How do you feel when bad things happen? Do you bounce back from adversity or sob indefinitely? Emotional resilience, the ability that some people have to withstand stress, was once thought to be a genetic gift. You were either lucky and had it, or you didn’t and struggled. Studies show that teenagers who fail exams have an increased risk of depression as adults, while athletes who lose can feel long-term guilt and humiliation. But recent psychological research suggests that emotional resilience can be developed. A systematic review of what makes people able to deal with failure looked at results from 46 studies.

**The solution**

The study found that having higher levels of self-esteem, a more positive way of explaining why things happen, and avoiding perfectionist thinking were strongly linked to bouncing back when things go wrong. Dr Judith Johnson, a clinical psychologist at the University of Leeds and lead author of the review, says we can build resilience. “Self-esteem was shown to be significant in two thirds of the studies we looked at in mediating the link between failure and distress,” she says.

Johnson adds that there are proven cognitive behavioural methods that raise self-esteem. You don’t have to believe you are wonderful to have emotional resilience, just that you are adequate. All you need to do is write a list of your positive qualities and examples of when you have shown them.

How you explain things also matters: if you attribute personal success to fluke rather than your own work and talent, then you are less able to use success to boost your self-esteem. If, however, you can brush off a disappointment by attributing it to external factors, such as not getting a job because they wanted a different skill mix, then you have the equivalent of emotional armour.

Finally, if you have perfectionist tendencies, lower them. Perfectionists hold rigid standards that don’t bend in the stormy weather of life. Johnson says we need to set more realistic standards. ‘‘Encourage people to be the best they can be,” she says. “If that doesn’t work out, then they should be assured there is a plan B. Being happy doesn’t depend on passing an exam. Flexible thinking is very important, especially in the young.”

She also advises self-awareness and noticing when you are stressed. “Negative emotions tap into the basic instinct of fear, so they narrow your life. If you feel stuck, do something that cheers you up. You need to plan these things into a schedule – doing them will chip away at your negative mood, even if you do enjoy them a bit less than usual.” Other research shows that the support of friends or family also helps emotional resilience, as does being physically active.

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