



**Melanie Greenberg Ph.D.**  
The Mindful Self-Express

RESILIENCE

# The One Resilience Skill You Need to Overcome Life Stress

Surprisingly, It's not grit, gratitude, or feeling in control

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On a recent trip to New York City, I had the privilege of visiting the 9/11 Memorial Museum. This experience touched me deeply and inspired awe. The exhibits showcased human malevolence and hatred, but they also vividly demonstrated the resilience of the human spirit in the face of even the most awful events. This visit renewed my interest in human resilience – the ability to experience negative events yet still maintain a sense of wellbeing and not get derailed by them. Some research shows that resilience is actually the most common response to potentially traumatic events. It's also true that not everyone is resilient; some people succumb to the long-term negative physical and psychological effects of chronic stress and trauma. What makes the difference? A 2017 study suggests that a single character strength is the prime predictor of continued wellbeing in the face of negative life events.

## Which character strength has the strongest protective effect?

In this study, published in the *Journal of Personality*, researchers from George Mason University (including fellow *Psychology Today* blogger Todd Kashdan) compared the effects of seven different character strengths in their ability to predict resilience, defined as continued wellbeing despite the occurrence of negative life events. In this study of almost 800 adults from 42 countries, participants completed questionnaires assessing different

experiencing serious conflict, financial or job loss, disappointment, illness or injury, or a loved one having a serious problem.

The data were analyzed using lagged analyses (meaning the variables were measured at different time points). Character strengths were measured 3 months prior to subjective well-being and negative life events were measured in the intervening time period. In other words, the researchers looked at which character strengths predicted future wellbeing and happiness, despite the negative life events that participants experienced in between.

Of all the character strengths assessed, only **hope** was a significant moderator of well-being in the face of negative life events. In other words, hope acted as a protective factor; in those with high hope, wellbeing was high even when many negative life events occurred. The other strengths, including grit, gratitude, meaning and so on did not protect against the negative impact of adversity.

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### How was this character strength defined?

What does it mean to be hopeful and why does hope have such a strong protective effect? Hope, as defined in this study, is different than just being optimistic about things getting better in the future. Rather, hope was defined as a positive and goal-oriented type of motivation. Hope involves having goals and pursuing them energetically and flexibly, finding many different pathways to getting positive results. Seeing hope in this way makes it clearer why it can help us withstand negative life events. Hope involves having a flexible approach in which we see many different paths to a positive end result. If you have high hope and you encounter obstacles, you can just take a different path. You are therefore less likely to see the failure as terminal or the result of personal deficiency. This attitude can carry you through hard times with both continued optimism and continued, flexible problem-solving efforts. With this approach, you are more likely to feel good about yourself and about life in general.

### Putting the research results into practice

Below is an exercise to help you become more hopeful:

*(1) Think of some important life goals. Describe them in general terms, rather than being too specific (e.g., good relationships, building wealth, meaningful work, being healthy etc.)*

*(2) Pick one or two life goals that are most important to you and describe as many different strategies as you can for achieving them. For example, if your goal is “being healthy,” you might write down “regular medical checkups,” “eating more fruits and vegetables,” “exercising regularly,” “getting more sleep” and so on.*

*(3) Think about any obstacles you may face to achieving these goals (e.g., lack of time, money, lazy habits, lack of self-confidence etc.)*

References

Goodman, F.R., †Disabato, D.J., Kashdan, T.B., & †Machell, K.A. (2017). Personality strengths as resilience: A one-year multi-wave study. *Journal of Personality*, 85, 423-434.



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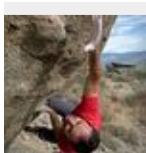


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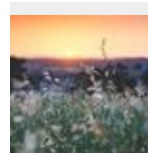


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