



McCabe Photography

Four steps to freedom

We can't work and sleep, yet we often spend our time in a state of 'waking sleep', says Dr Derek Roger. He outlines the steps to taking control of our attention and developing resilience.

In the last issue of *Employment Today*, I made the case that the items on life-event scales are not inherently stressful. If that were true, stress would be unavoidable. I also argued against the widely-held view that 'a bit of stress is good for you'. The research findings—both my own and other peoples'—are unambiguous in showing that stress not only makes you miserable but also has the potential to shorten your life.

Of course, this depends on your definition of stress. There is an important distinction between pressure, which is simply a demand for action, and stress, which is ruminating about your emotional reaction to the demand. Pressure refers to the things that happen in your life that you have to deal with; stress is ruminating about all the worst things in your life that never actually happened! The key to being resilient is to not turn pressure into stress.



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In the first article I described a state of mind called ‘waking sleep’, when your attention is snatched away: driving 30 kilometres from town X to town Y, for example, with no recollection of anything between them. When waking sleep is coloured by ruminating about emotional upset, it then becomes stress—and hence the first step in becoming resilient, and stress-free, is waking up.

To be really awake is to have presence of mind, and the easiest way to do this is to connect with your senses. Try just listening right now: listen to the sounds in the room you’re in, sounds elsewhere in the building, sounds outside. If you’re able to, close your eyes and really listen, though without anticipating or holding on to any sounds. Just be aware of the sound you can hear right now. That’s presence of mind: controlling your attention and giving it to now.

In fact, what you’ve just done is to take the first two steps in developing resilience, which are to *wake up* and *control your attention*. What you may have found, after a minute or so, is that all the thoughts about what you ought to be doing or should have done begin to crowd back in and capture your attention again. Hardly surprising—we’ve spent so long practising waking sleep that it becomes second nature! However, it is just habitual behaviour, which begins to change with the practice of staying awake for as long as you are able to whenever you do wake up.

No harm done?

You might say that a bit of daydreaming not only does no harm but can actually be quite pleasant, but it isn’t done intentionally. We don’t decide to think about next weekend for the next three minutes. Instead, we find ourselves 15 minutes later waking up from the dream, and if there’s a piece of work on the table, that’s 15 minutes less time spent doing it.

You can’t work and sleep. More importantly, if the thoughts in the mind become the worst things in your life that never happened rather than your next holiday, the dream turns into the nightmare of stress.

Does this mean being awake 100 percent of the time? I don’t know anyone who is; resilience training is about being more awake more of the time. It also doesn’t mean that the past or the future become irrelevant or useless. Memory is an essential tool. Without it we wouldn’t be able to draw on experience and learn from the past. Likewise, our passion and motivation are partly about what we’re working towards in the future.

The difference between this and waking sleep is that the present remains the point of reference: our attention doesn’t get caught up in reveries about how things might have been or how badly things might turn out.

Trying to protect yourself against failure by anticipating the

worst possible outcome doesn’t change the outcome; far better to work towards your vision, and if it doesn’t happen, learn from the experience, let go of the negative emotion and move on. Resilient people work with what is, not what might have been.

The first two steps give you back control over your attention and, since nothing gets done without attention, these are highly significant steps. However, without completing the process by taking the last two steps the force of habit will reassert itself. These last two steps are *becoming detached* and *letting go*.

The problem with a word like ‘detachment’ is that it can suggest being aloof or cold. What’s really meant by detachment is keeping things in perspective: people who are detached don’t turn molehills into mountains. They’re not unemotional, but they don’t catastrophise—instead of the emotional tail wagging the dog, the dog wags the tail.

What-ifs and if-onlys

When you become locked into negative rumination about ‘what-ifs’ and ‘if-onlys’ it is easy to forget that these are just thoughts, but thoughts that will make you miserable and may well shorten your life if you’re captured by them. Once you’ve woken up and taken control of attention, it is then possible to see these things as just thoughts that are not in any way resolving the issue.

To take a simple example, you have an argument with someone which you lose. What happens for the next two weeks driving down the highway? Over and over, you win, and you win, and you win. The truth is you lost, and the paradox is that when you eventually go back to the person to try to come to an agreement, they’ve often forgotten there was even an argument.

Once you’re able to see these ruminative processes as just thoughts, then you’re in a position to let go. If you want to catch a monkey, find a pot with a hole in it just big enough for him to squeeze his hand in, put one peanut inside, tie it to the ground and hide behind a tree. The monkey runs up, puts his hand in and grabs the peanut, but now he has a fist that’s too big to pull back through the hole, and you can run up and catch him.

The point about the story is that the forest is full of food, and the monkey gives up his life for a peanut. That’s what stress is like—all the issues we ruminate about endlessly are not resolving anything, they’re just peanuts, and like the monkey, to be free all we need do is let go.

The ruminative emotional thoughts that haunt us are all about the imagined past or future, and to let go we need to return to the present. The simplest way to have presence of mind is to connect with your senses, to actively give your attention to the here and now rather than having it snatched away.

It is important to remember that what's being let go of is not the work that needs to be done, but the negative emotion it comes wrapped up in. We make an emotional response to just about everything, somewhere on a continuum from 'I love doing this' to 'I hate doing that'. If you have an in-tray, the bottom of it will be filled with 'I hate doing that', and the problem is that they don't go away—the thought 'I really must get that done' keeps coming back and robbing you of the attention that you should be giving to the work in front of you. When you eventually decide one day to just get on and do it, you wonder what the fuss was all about!

Detached compassion

It isn't possible to be unemotional, and that certainly isn't the aim of resilience training. The aim is to develop what might be called *detached compassion*. This is what characterises any counselling process: if counsellors identify with all of the distressing things their clients talk about, you have two distressed people and no-one gets helped.

On the other hand, if counsellors don't care, no-one gets helped either. Detached compassion means being able to experience and understand emotion but not to allow it to overwhelm you, and is a life-skill as much as a counselling skill.

Everyone recognises rumination, so the question is, why do we do it? Think back to your last rumination: who was the central character? 'Me'. Much of our time is spent engaged in impression management, making sure that 'me' is seen in the best light and feeling devastated if it isn't.

An everyday example: you go to work in your brand-new clothes, and the first person you meet says, 'What junk-shop did you get *that* stuff from?' Me nosedives. The next person you meet says, 'Wonderful! You have such good taste!' Me soars like an eagle, up/down,

up/down, depending on what other people say.

For every 100 people you meet, probably 25 will like you, 25 won't, the rest are in the middle, and it doesn't matter. We want everyone to love us, and are distraught if they don't. If you're praised 99 times and criticised once, which do you remember?

What's been forgotten in all this is *attention*. We may not be able to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but we all have the same attention as Michelangelo. Or Einstein, or anyone else you'd care to think of. This attention is what we're empowered by, and we all have it. Not being resilient means that it gets hijacked by mere thoughts.

In one of the *Star Wars* movies, the hero, Luke Skywalker, sets off with two others to bomb the enemy spaceship. The bomb has to be dropped precisely, and on the way the other two pilots are knocked out. Everything depends on the hero, and what he does is to start ruminating about it. He's saved by the voice of his mentor, who tells him to wake up, control his attention, become detached and let go. What he actually says is, 'May the Force be with you!'

The Force is attention, and if you can let go of the thoughts that compromise it you get into what sports experts call the 'zone'. That's when change is seen as a challenge rather than a threat. Meeting the challenge of change with presence of mind is what resilience is really about, and it's a skill that can be learned and perfected. **et**

Derek Roger's company, *The Work Skills Centre*, provides his unique *Challenge of Change* training programme in addition to a range of individual and teamwork systems for enhancing performance. Visit www.challengeofchange.co.nz



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