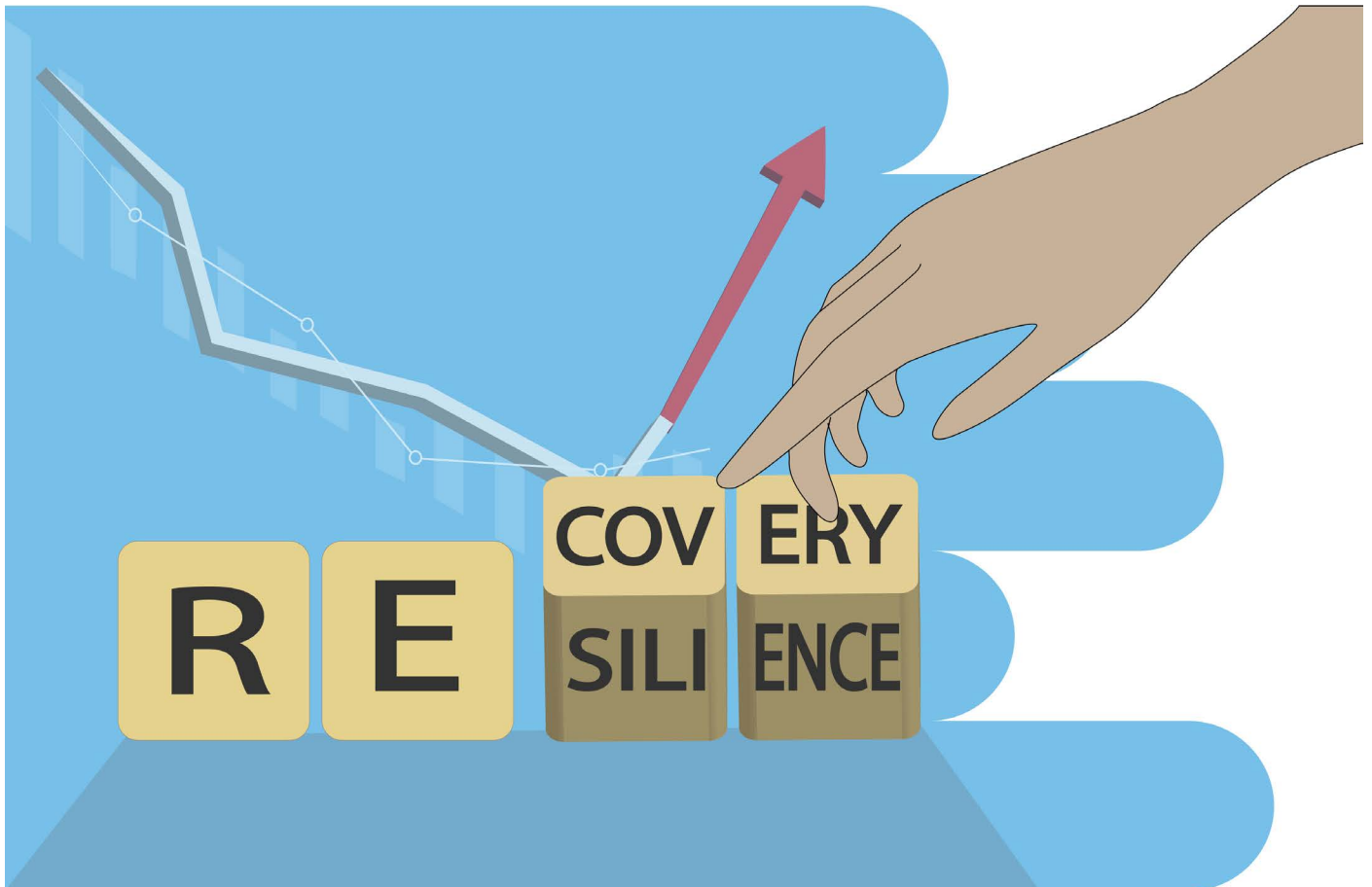


The Fundamentals of Building Resilience

Resilience is about taking a cold hard look at our expectations, explains Jason Liem



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As the year has come to a close, it has broadened my perspective and deepened my insights. These reflections have their roots in my research for my articles, the interviews with fascinating people on my podcast, and my work with scores of highly interesting clients.

Resilience has been at the heart of all three of these domains. As I have discovered, resilience shows up in various forms. Still, it all comes down to the common denominator of being able to bounce back from life's inevitable setbacks.

To share my insights with you, I've created a client case study representing the collective knowledge I've learned from several coaching clients and the guests on my [podcast](#). Let's call this client Hunter.

When I first met Hunter, he was feeling excessive pressure. The stress from his private and professional life triggered poor sleep, brain fog, mild levels of anxiety, and incessant pain in his neck and shoulders.

In our first session, it became apparent that it was not just the pressures around his job driving his stress reaction. It was also due to the incredibly demanding expectations he had for himself as a dad of two young children, a runner clocking 30 to 50 km a week, a team leader of a highly in-demand team, and a top-performing professional. The amount of pressure and duress he felt was primarily due to forcing himself to meet his own expectations.

Mind you, his professional and private expectations of himself have brought him

far. In both worlds, he is highly regarded and respected. People around him describe him as conscientious, honest, trustworthy, and professional.

The challenge was he was running himself ragged. Hunter was moving at such a pace that it was not sustainable. Something was going to give. His poor sleep patterns, brain fog, anxiety, and head and shoulder aches were evident signs that his system was maxing out.

If Hunter was to prevent himself from falling into the abyss, he needed to slow down and turn his attention inwards. Unless he could deal with his internal environment, a sense of well-being would always be beyond his reach. Building resilience is an inside job.



Let me share some thoughts on what I consider the fundamentals of a resilient mindset, and the shifts Hunter made to get on top of his game.

Expectation – The Rules of the Game

Our [expectations](#) become the rules of how we live our lives. Like the rules of any game, they determine the constraints of how we play the game. When it comes to the rules of life, many of us need to realise we hold the power to change them. We can rewrite these rules at any point so they act to our advantage.

For Hunter, like many of us, his expectations were set long ago by himself, his caregivers, teachers, coaches, neighbourhood, culture, or any number of other sources. Many of those expectations served him well when they were first established. They served as sturdy guide rails as he moved forward in life.

Like many things in our past, early expectations tend to fade from the foreground of our minds to the background as present-day challenges occupy our attention. Yet, although forgotten, these old rules are still ticking away in the recesses of our psyche, influencing our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

The man Hunter is today is different than the man he was 1, 5, 10, or 20 years ago. The personal evolution that all of us go through is inevitable. Our experiences leave an indelible mark on who we become. We move on, and the world moves on. But we can't always say the same about the expectations we have for ourselves.

For instance, when Hunter left university and started his first professional position, he could easily clock 70 to 100 hours at work. Back then, he was not a father of two young children, leading a highly competent team and holding a difficult and demanding position.

But somehow, Hunter was still rating the success of his current life based on expectations from when he first entered the game. Then he wondered why his life was fraying at the edges. But don't many fall into this trap? It may not be what Hunter experienced, but we each have created our gilded cage.

Resilience is about taking a cold hard look at our expectations. If we don't like what we see, we need to step up and rewrite the game's rules so they are relevant to our current reality, not the life we used to live.

Self-Compassion

People who know Hunter say he is a guy who lends a helping hand in times of need and elevates others when they succeed. They describe him as caring and empathic. But unfortunately, Hunter turns off compassion when it comes to himself.

When he makes a mistake, he continually berates himself. When he does something wrong, he is relentless in the negative comments he slings at himself. His expectations for himself are almost, if not completely, unattainable. When I ask Hunter if he expects the same of his son or daughter, his answer is a clear and definite no.

Why do many of us do this to ourselves when we know self-compassion is much more helpful than self-flagellation?

Self-compassion means being kind and understanding towards ourselves. Accepting that we are not perfect means we create space for development and growth when we fumble or fall. Self-compassion is about adopting a learner's mindset, which fuels self-confidence and jettisons self-doubt. In addition, researchers have found that self-compassion positively correlates with improved mental health and greater life satisfaction.

Like Hunter, we can make peace with our inner critic. We can stop punishing ourselves for our foul-ups. We can accept that we are not perfect. When confronted with our shortcomings, we can be kind to ourselves.

As he realised, friends and colleagues value him because of who he is, not because he is faultless. Through our conversations, Hunter recognised that he was deriving his sense of self-worth from perfection and outcome. But, as we all rationally know, perfection is close to impossible, and outcomes are susceptible to circumstances beyond our control.

For Hunter to turn on the faucet of self-compassion, he began to talk to himself as he would to his children. He asked himself what he learned from his mistakes, spoke

words of encouragement, and changed and eliminated dysfunctional expectations so they were pliable and resilient.

To make sure he did not turn off the self-compassion faucet, I asked him to place sticky notes on his bathroom mirror, his computer screen, and his car's dashboard as constant reminders.

The Short and Long Game

The nature of Hunter's job was pressure. He was a master at time management, and there was little to no room for more tweaking of his time. So, where the change came from was his relationship with pressure.

When under pressure, we must be selective about how we invest our attention. As our minds speed up, we become too occupied with the outcome and pay too little attention to the effort needed to reach the outcome. Focusing too much on the result can be incredibly draining on our motivation. Especially when we know there is a vast distance to cover before we cross the finishing line. The expanse can leave us feeling overwhelmed.

[The Short Game](#) is about investing our energy and efforts in the present to help us achieve our future objectives of the Long Game. But unfortunately, like Hunter, we spend way too much of our mental powers on the outcomes of the Long Game and far too little where we truly can make a difference: on the actions we can take in the Short Game.

Hunter's mind was very often somewhere in the future, depleting his attention on the outcome of finishing a project. Unfortunately, it left him feeling overwhelmed by how far he still needed to go before arriving at his final destination.

Focusing too much on where we want to be instead of what we need to do in the present to get there can leave us feeling overwhelmed. This feeling leads to ruminating about our lack of progress, which leads to inaction and indecision, which fuels even more negative thinking.

Instead, Hunter redirected his attention to what he could do today to move the project forward. Taking decisive action nourishes his sense of control over his situation. If he had only moved the project a centimetre that day, it was still progressing. Action is

the remedy for inaction. Decisions are the countermeasure to indecision.

At the same time, we don't want to swing the pendulum too far in the other direction of only focusing on what to do in the here and now. We need to temper our approach. A simple rule of thumb is to invest 20% of our attention on the outcome to ensure we are headed in the right direction with the correct orientation. The other 80% of our attention is focused on investing our efforts and taking the action needed to get us to arrive at the destination.

Hunter discovered that making this simple attentional shift boosted his sense of autonomy, self-confidence, and motivation.

Gratitude

Another pillar of sustainable resilience is to adopt the [practice of gratitude](#). Gratitude is a complex emotion, but we can capture its essence by stating two words – thank you. It is an appreciation for what we have and how far we have traversed along the road we are on.

A sense of gratitude requires us to bring our attention to the here and now. When Hunter was present with his thoughts and emotions, he could acknowledge and appreciate the things, the people, the accomplishments, and the opportunities in his life. At the same time, an appreciation dawned in him about the hurdles, pitfalls, and obstacles he had overcome.

This shift in perspective is available to all of us. The return we collect from adopting a grateful frame of mind is that we feel healthier and happier.

Thanks to the brain's plasticity, investing in gratitude can become a default habit. One effective way of developing gratefulness is to adopt a learner's mindset. In my podcast episode [Embracing the Struggle](#), I spoke

extensively on this topic and how every situation becomes a learning opportunity, whether we succeed or fumble.

When we focus on gratitude, our brain has heightened prefrontal activity. This increased activity results in enhanced mental functions such as creative thinking, cognitive flexibility, and faster processing. In addition, these emotions widen our attention span and change our perception to focus more on what we have achieved and gained instead of what we have lost or what we lack.

Talk to Others

Another pillar of resilience is the ability to process burdensome thoughts and emotions. [Talking about our concerns](#) with a trusted person can help us work out what is bothering us and figure out what we can do about it. It also allows us to understand how and why we think and feel the way we do. Such insight increases our ability to handle future thoughts and emotions.

Hunter realised that when he keeps his troubles bottled up, this can create more unintended problems. He learned the hard way that the brain has the absurd ability to overthink a situation. It can turn a worry into an unmitigated crisis. In the blink of an eye, Hunter can find himself caught up in a whirlwind of rumination and self-doubt.

Talking about our concerns is like getting enough sleep, eating well, and exercising. All these efforts contribute to the improvement of our well-being and resilience.

When change and uncertainty appear on our doorstep uninvited, our initial response usually triggers defensive emotions like anger, concern, or anxiety. These emotions are a normal response to an adverse and unexpected event.

Our initial thoughts focus on all the things that could go wrong. Next, our minds play out the worst-case scenarios. Then, finally, we get wrapped up in speculation – all the *what-ifs* of things that could go sideways for us.

When discussing with Hunter a troublesome situation he was facing at work, his first sentences were tainted with frustration and doubt. But this is entirely normal. It is part of the venting process. Speaking our mind out loud allows us to vent and sort through our entangled thoughts and emotions, allowing us to process an event.

In the case of Hunter, our coaching session did not change the reality of his situation, but what it did do was help him to shift his perspective. We are more reflective when we feel listened to and can articulate our fears and worries in a safe, non-judging environment. And when we are in a contemplative state, we see options and possibilities that fuel our motivation and engagement.

Wrapping It Up

As I move into 2023, I look back and appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on building resilience through writing articles and hosting my podcast, [It's an Inside Job](#).

Like Hunter, I feel that 2022 has been a steep learning curve for me. But also, like Hunter, I've taken onboard lessons that I shared with you today.

I hope 2023 will present you with challenges you can grow from and opportunities that will fuel you. Until the next time we connect, keep well, keep strong, and we will speak soon. Keep on building resilience!

Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs

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