



# A Resilience Toolkit



## Maintaining Resilience Through Challenging Times

by Resilience Researcher and Author

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## LOOK FOR AND TELL

# *Your Family's Resilience Stories*

In his book, *Secrets of the Happy Family*, Bruce Feller studied the practices of successful and resilient families. One of his central findings: resilient families tell their stories of resilience. In the telling and retelling, family members recommit themselves to the wisdom and learnings gleaned from those experiences.

When a family revisits their resilience stories, a profound message gets communicated: “In our family, it is not the end of the world when things don’t go the way we wish they would, because things have a way of recovering, bouncing back, and there are even opportunities in those down times.”

### An Exercise to Recall and Tell Your Resilience Stories

Line up a virtual meeting of your family members. Ask them:

- “What stories of resilience do you remember?”
- “How has that experience or story shaped our identity as a family?”
- “What wisdom do you think came out of that experience?”
- “What values showed up in our family DNA as a result of that experience or story?”
- “How can the wisdom that flows from that story serve us as we navigate the current challenges?”

Finally, in years to come, people will be telling resilience stories about these currently challenging times. “**What part do you want to be playing in those stories?**”



**More About  
RESILIENCE STORIES**





More About  
**RESILIENCE WITHIN**



## *Look for the African Violets*

### AND INTENTIONALLY GROW THEM

**M**y colleague Bill O'Hanlon tells the story recounted to him by the famous and incredibly effective psychotherapist Milton Erikson. In the town where Erikson practiced, a local therapist reached out to him for a consultation. The woman he was treating for depression was not improving. Erikson agreed to the consult, but asked that his interview of her take place in her home. The meeting was arranged, and after introductions, Erikson asked for a tour of her home. He noted as he was taken from room to room, the darkness, dustiness, and disheveled state of things.

The house itself seemed to speak a message of depression, until she showed him to the back porch. There he discovered big pots, small pots, medium-sized pots, tiny starts, all filled with African violets. As he regarded this cascade of plants, Erikson asked her, "When you give these African violets away to your fellow church members, I'll bet they're really grateful!" Earlier in the conversation, the woman had disclosed that her membership in her local Christian church was very important to her. "Give these African violets away?" the woman responded, "These are my violets. I don't give these away." Erikson mused, "Oh, I thought you said you were Christian."

Years later, Milton Erikson was in his study opening the mail. From one of the envelopes, he extracted a newspaper clipping whose headline read, "AFRICAN VIOLET QUEEN DIES." He read down into the obituary to discover that the woman he had interviewed years earlier had become something of a famous person in her small town for giving away her African violets to people in need.

The depression had lifted. After the interview, the therapist asked Erikson, "What was all that about 'African violets,' and 'I thought you were Christian?'"

Erikson looked at the therapist and said, "At one point in my interview of your patient, I knew I had to make a decision, do I want to focus this woman's attention on her depression, or do I want to help her focus on growing her African violets?"

Where are the African violets in your life? What are the African violets in your life?



## AN EXERCISE TO

# *Grow Your African Violets*

**I**n the story, a hobby became a life-line in a woman's challenge to manage her depression. In your life, what is an activity or hobby that reliably takes away worry, sadness, anxiety, or depression? In the next days and weeks, could you intentionally make time to engage in this activity? If you can pair that activity with some form of service for someone else, the benefits of your activity will multiply.

My son has been using his elongated Spring Break to learn to play guitar. This Wednesday evening, he joined his guitar-playing mother on the porch for a happy hour sing-along. Slowly, porch after porch in our neighborhood filled with co-singer-neighbors. During the song, "Sweet Caroline," the lyric, "Hands...touching hands...reaching out...touching me...touching you" led to a spontaneous lifting of hands extending across the street for an air touch.

While fully CDC compliant, for some stretch of time, it occurred to me that the space that Covid-19 occupied in all of our hearts shrunk significantly, and the space between us seemed negligible...even if just for an evening.

What are the African violets in your life? How can you intentionally grow them?





## ENGAGE IN

# Frequent Beauty Checks

One of our family's signature stories has been told and retold within the pages of my blog and many presentations related to the practice of resilience. It is the story of an early, child-free wilderness vacation in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota/Canada.

In short, attempting to meet our outfitter for a ride home from our week-long wilderness vacation, in the pre-cell phone days of the early Nineties, Lisa and I could not afford to wait out an ominous storm. Despite pulling on our paddles as hard as we could, battling stout whitecaps and wind, we conducted "beauty checks" for many hard miles and hours until we met up with our ride home.

The vocabulary of beauty checks, and the philosophy behind it – staying positive by intentionally savoring beauty in the midst of adversity – has been a part of the foundation of my family over the last twenty-four years. To this day, we are convinced that it was our beauty checks that gave us the energy to successfully make our way to our original "put in" spot.



More About  
**BEAUTY CHECKS**



## Some Beauty Check Exercises:

Consistent with the recommendations of your community, while sheltering at home, find a way to **get outdoors** and do some beauty checks in nature itself. Plenty of research points to the restorative power of nature to contextualize any challenge, no matter how stout. For more on the resilience found in nature, see Matthew White, in *The Scientific Reporter*, 9, 7730, 2019.

**Keep a Beauty Check Journal**, and record your beauty checks on a daily basis. Just to stretch the meaning of the word "beauty," it can include any kindnesses performed for you, any kindness performed by you, and any moment when you were aware of warmth, connection, or transcendence.

**Create beauty in your environment.** If you are an artist, paint or draw. If you are a musician, play (outdoors for your neighbors if you can!). If you can create beauty by your intentional or random acts of kindness, altruism creates resilience for the subject as well as the object of the altruism (again, keeping CDC recommendations in mind).



More About  
**MINDFULNESS**



## *Practice Mindfulness\**

In times of uncertainty, unwanted emotions such as anxiety, sadness, or anger frequently accompany us. Researchers in my profession of counseling psychology have noted that attempting to push away harsh feelings can have the unintended consequence of embedding them. A much more effective approach involves mindfully noticing those feelings and allowing them until they pass through of their own accord. Mindfulness meditation and practice are form-fitted for this kind of task.

\* For more, see Jelena Kecmanovic, March 16, 2020, *Washington Post*, "A Psychotherapist's Science-based Tips for Emotional Perseverance During the Coronavirus Crisis."



# Mindfulness Practice Smorgasbord

## **BRAIN Methodology of Mindfulness Practice (Five Minutes)**

You may find an adaptation of Tara Brach's methodology helpful. Think of it as the "BRAIN" method. Breathe with awareness as a way to center yourself into five minutes of reflection. Imagine that with each breath, you are taking in more peace and compassion. Let your attitude toward yourself be one of compassion and kindness.

Recognize what is happening within you. This recognition could include a thought, an image, a physical sensation, or an emotion. Allow life to be just as it is. Rather than judging what you are experiencing, or changing it, simply allow it to be. Investigate with kindness and gentleness.

If the intensity of the experience hasn't diminished, then simply and gently ask yourself, what is this feeling asking me to be aware of? If the intensity of the feeling becomes overwhelming or debilitating, contact a psychotherapist to sort out a plan of action.

Non-identification: let yourself hold the awareness that the thought, emotion, or feeling that you have doesn't sum you up. You are having this feeling, thought, or story, and you are more than any of these.

## **Just Breathe (Two-Five Minutes)**

**Nostrils.** Start with an awareness of your breath at the threshold of your nostrils. When any thought/mental picture comes, don't fight it, don't cling to it. Simply bring your awareness back to the same spot at the threshold of your nostrils.

**Back of Your Throat.** Gradually shift your awareness to the back of your throat. Slowly increase your awareness of the pulse of your breath. Call to mind the pulse of life in all of nature, and your relationship to it.

**Breathing Tube and Lungs.** Next, let your awareness drift back to that tube that takes the breath down into your lungs. The life-giving breath is providing oxygen for your red blood cells as they are pumped to the furthest reaches of your body to supply life-sustaining nutrition for your tissues. Imagine then, that you are breathing down your arms, out into your fingertips. Imagine that you are breathing down your legs, through your calves, out into your feet, all the way to the tips of your toes. Savor. Enjoy for as long as you like. End with a smile.

## **Incredible Lightness of Being (Two Minutes)**

Inhale. Imagine that rather than breathing in air, you are breathing in pure sweet, golden, wholesome light. Exhale. Purse your lips. Each time you exhale, make a gentle blowing sound. Blow out anything of needless anxiety or toxic stress.



**More About  
JUST BREATHE**



**More About  
LIGHTNESS OF BEING**





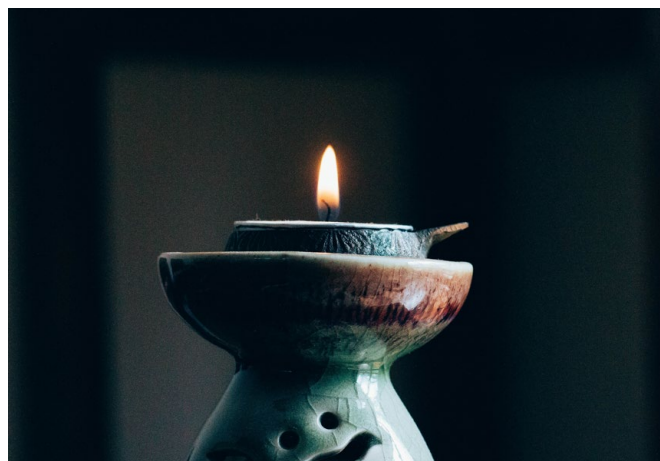
# Mindfulness Practice Smorgasbord (Cont.)

## Clearing Meditation (Five to Ten Minutes)

Breathe intentionally. Then anchor by selecting a word or very brief phrase (no more than two or three words), and begin to breathe it in with each inhale. Select something that has meaning for you. You can try on a mantra like, “May I be light,” or “May I be peace.” You may find shortening your mantra to an anchoring word like “Light” or “Peace” is simpler. Empty. Whenever a thought or image enters your mind, do not attempt to fight it, or chase it away. Let it pass by utilizing your anchoring word to go deeper than the thought, imaginative picture, or feeling. At the end of the time you have set aside, slowly breathe in the phrases of a favorite prayer or poem.



More About  
**CLEARING MEDITATION**



## The Green Mile Meditation (One Minute)

**Awareness:** become aware of the first signs of stress.

**Breath:** take in a long, slow, deep breath of light, until you have filled up every cubic centimeter of your lungs. **Blow:** Purse your lips so that when you exhale, you are making a blowing sound. As in the movie “The Green Mile” by Steven King, imagine that when you are blowing out, you are exhaling any harmful stress, negativity, or useless anxiety.

## Mindfulness on the Fly (One Minute)

**Awareness:** become aware of the first signs of harmful stress. **Breath:** Concentrate on taking deep, slow breaths. Inhale through the nose, exhale through your mouth. Inhale your anchoring word. **Exhale harmful stress out of your mouth:** Attempt to make a slight blowing sound as you do it. Imagine that you are inhaling light down into your core. Imagine that when you exhale, you are breathing out harmful stress, or an unhelpful internal message. Assign a color and a shape to this stress, say like smog or smoke. Repeat this process as often as needed.





# What's Renting Space in Your Head

## COGNITIVE APPROACHES

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has demonstrated great efficacy in treating anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and relief from relapse in addictions. (For more, check out George Eifert, and John Forsyth's, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Anxiety Disorders*, 2005. New Harbinger Press).

By now, most of you will have had some contact with these common sense concepts. In a nutshell, it is impossible to decide away an unwanted feeling. On the other hand, if you can take just a moment to become aware of the thoughts that accompany the unwanted feelings, and reflect upon them, you may discover that those thoughts are overly negative, or unrealistic. If they are, amend the particular thought until it is more realistic, and less negative.

A helpful hint: amend the thought out loud so that your ears can hear the new formulation. For example, when lost in Saint Louis' poorly named streets when I first moved here, I would bang the steering wheel, and call myself an "idiot." If a friend did the very same thing from the passenger seat of my car, that would be devastating, or at least anger provoking. But I am closer to me than a best friend.

To utilize cognitive therapy self-help would be to notice the negative cognition (or thought), and to correct it out loud. For example: "I am not great at directions, but I am smart enough at other things."



More About  
CBT





# Cognitive Techniques Smorgasbord

## Talking Back to a Catastrophe

Even in the best of times, it is easy for many of us to “catastrophize.” This involves extrapolating from the data that is true and then imagining the worst case scenario.

In normal times, a cold can be mistaken for pneumonia. A brusque interaction with an coworker in your field of choice can seem like an deal breaker for your career. In non-normal times, say...a pandemic... catastrophizing comes almost automatically. The problem with it, of course, is the weight of needless anxiety.

When you become aware that you are catastrophizing, don’t try to talk yourself out of the catastrophic hypothesis. You won’t succeed. Rather, generate two additional hypotheses that are more positive and could be plausible. Say them out loud to yourself.

## Power Statements

Twelve-Step programs for addictions (like Alcoholics Anonymous) succeed, in part, with the cognitive restructuring provided by power statements or slogans that have emotional punch. “One day at a time,” is uttered out loud when the addict imagines a lifetime without the substance of choice.

Develop a power statement or two of your own. If you have a favorite poem or piece of sacred writing that has special emotional resonance for you, use it. Try to keep your power statement short.



## “Then What?” Technique

This methodology can be used when catastrophizing as well. Imagine the thing that you’re afraid of, and ask yourself, “...then what would I do?” In this way, you can quiet your mind by briefly coming up with a contingency plan for the worst-case scenario.

## A Worry Journal for Sleeping

When getting to sleep is an issue because your mind wants to spin around anxiety-provoking thoughts, create a worry journal. At least three hours before bed, write every worry that you can think of down in the journal. Problem solve if you can. Sort out your thoughts if you can.

What is most important is that you record the worries as a way of containing them. When it is time for bed, you can know that you have taken care of thinking those thoughts earlier.



## *Reducing the Space for Coronavirus*

**(or other significant stressors like work)**

**Limiting Conversational Space:** One way to do this is to decide ahead of time how much space you and your dialogue partner will dedicate to the pandemic (thirty-percent? Twenty-five percent?). This is an important technique for work-related conversations as well.

**Limiting the Physical Space:** Designate certain areas of your residence as places where you will not discuss pandemics (eg. bed, dining table). If you must, pick up your laptop or phone and move to a different space to discuss this topic.



More About  
**NEGATIVITY**







## Connecting from a Distance

By now we are all “sheltering in place” and practicing “social distancing.” I want to be careful to notice that the CDC is not recommending social isolation. The genius of the human species has always been our ability to come together and support one another. The scientist, Carlo Rovelli, author of *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, as well as *The Order of Time*, defines the key component of our evolutionary success to be the human ability to love.

You read that correctly, based upon scientific research, our key strategy to survive and thrive is our ability to love. Along the same lines, the longest psychological study in history has been the seventy-five year long, rigorous, Harvard study. Its most significant finding has been that warm-hearted relationships are the key to resilience. Perhaps it is time to reformulate the phrase “social distancing” to render it more accurately, “Social Connecting from a Distance.”



## *Tips for Connecting from a Distance*

### **Practice Courageous Vulnerability in Your Significant Conversations**

In her many books, Breneé Brown, a resilience researcher in her own right, has noted that a core ingredient to intimacy is vulnerability.

In a recent conversation with an old friend this week, I signed off with, “I’ll see you later. Take care.” I hung the phone up, and thought, “Wait a minute, that was lame.” I called him back immediately and said, “Don, I forgot to say, ‘I love you.’” During this time of uncertainty, say how you are really feeling, and don’t be afraid to say, “I love you.” Utilize this time to deepen your friendships.

### **Express Gratitude**

This fits with the concept of Beauty Checks. Martin Seligman has conducted research on the power of gratitude to enhance resilience. Part of that research indicated that writing a letter of gratitude to someone significantly boosts the happiness levels of the sender. It also lowers indices of depression and anxiety. Reading that letter aloud to the recipient in real time increases the magnitude of those indices of well being.



### **Formulate Daily Connection Rituals**

By now, you have seen the smorgasbord of ways that people are connecting online with one another. Through various platforms, people are conducting happy hours, trivia nights, regularly scheduled morning coffee, mealtimes, even prayer in common. Have you established regularly scheduled connection rituals with your significant others?



# Know What Can't Be Taken from You

The seminal resilience research in the modern era of psychology was conducted by Viktor Frankl in a concentration camp during World War II. The central insight has to do with the power of a sense of purpose or meaning in getting through difficulties. He summed up this initial research in his powerful book, *Man's Search for Meaning*...not a bad book to read during this time.

There was a scene in the movie, *Shawshank Redemption* that emphasized the core insight of Frankl's Existential Psychology. You might recall that the main character in this movie, Andy Dufrane, was unjustly framed for a murder and given a life sentence in the horrible prison called Shawshank. Since he was a model prisoner, he was given the job of managing the prison library. In that role, he sent many letters requesting donations.

Finally, after many years, a large shipment of books and records arrived through the prison gates. While unloading it, Andy discovered the prize above all others. The camera zooms in on Andy lovingly wiping dust off of the album cover of a Mozart aria. The viewer sees a light bulb of recognition form over Andy's head. With that, he bolted for the room that houses the prison PA system. He locked himself into the room. He placed the record on the turntable and bent the 1950's goose-neck microphone down to collect the sound and broadcast it throughout the prison.

As the men look up in wonderment all over the prison yard, Andy, for his part, was caught up in Seventh Heaven, enraptured by the dulcet sounds of a soaring soprano. He was so taken by the music that he didn't hear the prison guard pounding on the door until that door was broken down, and the hard thud of a billy club knocked him into

unconsciousness. The next stop for Andy was a month of hard time in solitary confinement, known as "the hole."

The next scene in the movie showed Andy being re-connected with his prison mates in the lunchroom. His best friend, Red (played by Morgan Freeman), asked him, "How was your time in the hole?" "Easiest time I ever did," Andy replied. "Easy? Time in the hole is never easy," Red retorted. "I had Mozart with me," Andy explained. "They let you keep a record player down there?" Red was incredulous. "No. It was here (Andy pointed to his chest). I had Mozart right here (he pointed again)." With that, all of the men at his lunch table laughed so hard they practically passed their milk through their noses.

With that Andy's expression shifted to a kind of shock, or pity for his prison mates. Slowly, he began to speak, "You mean you don't have that?" He continued, "In a place that's this cold and this cruel, you got to have something in here

(Once again, he pointed to his heart). You gotta have something that they can't get to...something they can't take from you."

I want to end this little "Resilience Toolkit" with a question that was contained in the movie cited above, but might as well have been issued from Viktor Frankl himself. **"What is that thing that not even a pandemic can take from you?"**

Another way to ask it would be, **"What ultimately gives your life a sense of purpose and meaning?"** In the next days, weeks, and months, see if you can construct routines and rituals that connect to what gives your life meaning and purpose.







## Resilience Reading List

### Happiness Research Has Many Resilience Cross-over Applications

Achor, Shawn. (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. New York: Random House

Achor, Shawn. (2013). *Before Happiness*. (2013). New York: Random House

### Resilience Review of the Literature with Helpful Tips and Good Stories

Southwick, S.M. & Charney, D.S. (2016). *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

### Resilience in Midlife and Beyond. A Great Read. Well Researched

Bradley Hagerty, Barbara. 2016. *Life Reimagined: The Science and Art of Midlife*. New York: Riverhead Books.

### Resilience Writing from a Philosophical & Systemic Perspective. Several chapters are practical

Zolli, A. & Healy, A.M. (2012). *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. New York: Free Press

## Resilience Stories

Olympic athlete Louis Zamperini's story of survival against all odds. Movie can't begin to approach the beauty of this writing. Also...a page turner from page one.

Hillenbrand, Laura. (2010). *Unbroken*. New York: Penguin Random House

63 year-old swimmer breaks open ocean distance swimming record after five tries.

Nyad, Diana. (2015). *Find a Way*. New York: Vintage



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