

RESILIENT THINKING: TAMING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

By Anne Brafford | abrafford@aspire.legal | www.aspire.legal

HOW STRESS CAN HOLD US BACK

The problem with stress in our everyday lives is not that it occurs—since it can be useful for energy, attention, and performance. Problems can arise when we're reactive to small, daily stressors, when we get stuck in a Stress Spiral, or when stress undermines our confidence. Resilient thinking can help us overcome all of these well-being obstacles.

EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY TO DAILY HASSLES

Every day, lawyers confront a stream of hassles that, individually, seem small and harmless. Research shows, though, that if we don't effectively manage our emotional response, these small irritants can accumulate and create big problems. Research has found that our response style to common, minor stressors is a stronger predictor of depressed mood and anxiety than total stress (Felsten, 2004). Stressors studied included many minor, everyday things like not finishing a task, hurrying to meet a deadline, being interrupted, being criticized or ignored, forgetting something, having difficulty in traffic, and misplacing something. The more stressful people rated each example (called stress reactivity), the more vulnerable they were to mood disturbances, which are precursors to more serious mental and physical health conditions. You're likely prone to stress reactivity if you would describe yourself as having a hard time relaxing and basically anxious with tendencies to feel guilty, slighted, and moody.

THE CHRONIC STRESS SPIRAL

We also can get caught in downward Stress Spirals (Livheim et al., 2018). A key cause for this is that we humans have very limited cognitive space or "mental bandwidth"—the brainpower needed to manage our demanding daily lives (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). "Tunneling" happens when we become so preoccupied with a stressor that it consumes excessive mental bandwidth, leaving little capacity for anything else. Because our full

bandwidth for thinking isn't available, we can lose the ability to mentally process effectively, literally drop IQ points, and become more impulsive and lacking in self-control.

THE CONFIDENCE GAP

Low self-confidence in our ability to be effective can cause depression and other mental health conditions. On the other hand, among the biggest contributors to well-being is making progress toward goals that are meaningful to us. But fear and anxiety about failing and looking dumb often can become an obstacle to pursuit of growth opportunities and ambitious goals. We may hold ourselves back, waiting to feel completely confident—and for the negative self-talk warning us about potential failure to quiet down—before we jump in and try. Thinking that we have to feel fully confident and free of stress and anxiety before trying to achieve our goals is a self-defeating perspective called "[the confidence gap](#)" (Harris, 2011).



RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET

*We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts, we make the world. — Buddha*

RESILIENT RESPONDING TO STRESS

Don't Believe Everything You Think. A key insight from resilience research has been life-changing for many: Stress is not triggered by adverse external events but by our avalanche of thoughts, predictions, and interpretations that adverse events trigger. Resilient thinking starts with learning to separate our thoughts from the emotional and behavioral consequences of those thoughts and cultivating optimism.

Pessimism vs. Optimism. Our “appraisal style” is how we tend to interpret stressful situations. It’s important because it affects our level of stress reactivity and mental health.

- **Pessimistic Appraisal Style:** We have a pessimistic appraisal style if we habitually interpret challenging events in an overly negative way. We may consistently overestimate how bad the consequences will be, overestimate the probability of those bad consequences occurring, and/or underestimate our ability to effectively respond.
- **Optimistic Appraisal Style:** We have an optimistic appraisal style when our habits of thought are more positive and hopeful when considering the likely consequences of challenges and our ability to cope.
- **Realistic Optimism.** Resilient thinking is not overly pessimistic or overly optimistic. It’s a flexible approach in which we realistically appraise challenges in ways that favor optimistic explanations and predictions when the knowable (often fuzzy) facts allow that perspective.

Becoming Aware Of Our Thought-Emotion Links. Stressful events often trigger automatic streams of negative self-talk that stir up negative emotions. Resilient thinking requires that we pay closer attention to our automatic thoughts so that we can modify them before they run wild and emotions carry us away.

To prepare to respond effectively to stress, it’s helpful to identify our common triggers and self-talk habits:

- What circumstances often trigger you to feel anxiety, panic, self-doubt, anger, irritation, guilt, shame, or embarrassment?
- When negative self-talk starts up, what is it often saying?

Iceberg Beliefs. These automatic thoughts often occur so fast that we’re not consciously aware of them. This means that we need to really slow down to detect them. We also should explore deeply-held beliefs (called “iceberg beliefs”) that may be triggering our negative thoughts. High-achieving professionals often have iceberg beliefs like these (see Wiessman, 1979):

- Mistakes will make people think less of me.
- My life is wasted unless I’m successful.
- If I don’t set the highest standards for myself, I’ll be a mediocre person.
- To be a worthwhile person, I must truly excel in at least one major aspect of my life.
- If I don’t always do well, people will lose respect for me.
- I must be a useful, productive person or life has no purpose.
- People who have good ideas are more worthy than people who don’t.

People who have habits of thought like these are more likely to experience depression and anxiety.

Common Thought-Emotion Links. The precise way that our self-talk plays out is unique to each of us—but we can categorize types of self-talk that trigger specific emotions. Understanding these connections can help us identify and process our emotions and figure out how to respond constructively. The table below shows common thought-emotion links (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

THOUGHT	EMOTION
My rights have been violated.	Anger
I’ve experienced a loss.	Sadness, depression
I have violated a commitment to you or my own standards for myself.	Guilt
Something bad is going to happen.	Anxiety, fear
Others know I did something badly.	Embarrassment

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET

*She stood in the storm, and when the wind did not blow her way,
she adjusted the sails. — Elizabeth Edwards*

6 Steps for Resilient Thinking

The overarching aim in resilient thinking is psychological and regulatory flexibility, which is defined as:

The ability to be consciously aware of our internal experience and, based on situational demands, to flexibly choose, change, or persist in behaviors that aligns with our values and goals.

(Aldao et al. 2015; Blanke et al., 2019; Flaxman & Bond, 2010; Sutcliffe et al., 2018; Tyndall et al., 2018; Wersebe et al. 2018).

Flexibility requires: (1) an ability to avoid being carried away by our emotions by cultivating a conscious awareness of our inner experience, (2) an ability to read the situation to guide the choice of self-regulation strategy, (3) a repertoire of self-regulatory skills and behaviors from which to choose, and (4) an ability to change strategies if needed (Southwick et al., 2014). Below are six steps to get started on building your psychological flexibility.

Step 1: Cultivate Conscious Awareness of Your Inner Experience

If we're not consciously aware of our self-talk and the emotions that flow from it, we lose the ability to choose an effective response when we're flooded with strong emotions. This skill is similar to mindfulness and encourages a flexible awareness of our current experiences (inner and external) without negative judgments, evaluations, or self-critical comparisons. Options for building this skill include:

- Mindfulness Meditation
- Loving-Kindness Meditation
- Be Where You Are
- Mindful Eating or Drinking
- Listen to Classical Music
- "Mindfulness Reps"
- "Cubbyholing" (consciously categorizing inner experiences as: emotion, thought, sensation, action urge, memory)

(Hayes, 2005; Chamine, 2012). The Mindfulness questionnaire in the Appendix (page 7) will help assess this skill.

Step 2: Label The Emotion

It may sound weird, but labeling our negative emotions (e.g., "This feeling I'm experiencing is anxiety") and being able to differentiate between them (e.g., "This feeling is anxiety, not anger or sadness") contributes to well-being (Kalokerinos et al., 2019) and down-regulates our physiological stress response (by, for example, quieting the amygdala; Lieberman et al., 2008, 2011). Labeling also may reduce the likelihood of misattribution—i.e., a mistake about the cause of our emotions (You might be tired, not mad.) The more specific we can be in differentiating our emotional experiences, the more powerful the effect.

To carry out this step, you can try the following:

1. Focus your attention on the most intense emotion you're experiencing.
2. Label the emotion as best you can without identifying with it (e.g., "I'm having thoughts that I was treated unfairly and this feeling I'm experiencing is anger" rather than "I'm angry").
3. Rate the intensity of the feeling on a scale from 0 to 10 (with 0 being the least intense).
4. Identify where you feel the emotion in your body.
5. Repeat the process for other emotions that you're experiencing less intensely (Berking & Whitely, 2010).

ACTIVITY. How many words can you use to describe your emotional experiences? How nuanced are your descriptions? Broadening your emotional vocabulary (called "emotional granularity") may improve your ability to regulate your emotions and your well-being (Barrett, 2017). The same applies to positive emotions: Expanding your positive emotional vocabulary may enrich your experience of well-being (Lomas, 2016).

Step 3: Accept Negative Experience: Don't Suppress or Avoid It

As you're taking note of your thoughts and feelings without judging them, remember that emotions are normal, healthy, and temporary reactions. Try to accept the experience without avoiding or suppressing it. Acceptance entails allowing yourself to ex-

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET

perience your feelings without attempting to control or change them in any way, to stay with your emotions as fully as possible and to let them run their natural course (Hoffman et al., 2009). Accepting negative experiences does not mean that we want to feel bad—just that we're willing to put ourselves in situations that might trigger anxiety, stress, and the like in order to align our behavior with our goals and things we value.

The alternative to acceptance is trying to suppress or avoid negative thoughts and emotions, which typically will make them multiply and become more powerful (Hayes, 2005). Suppression also tends to elevate our physiological stress response and feelings of anxiety (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2009). Additionally, when we try to avoid negative emotions, we often try to avoid the events that trigger them—which results in an increasingly narrow life, an increasingly stronger fear of encountering the event, and declining well-being.

Step 4: Defuse From Your Thoughts: Don't Believe Everything You Think

“Defusion” aims to “unhook” our thoughts from our actions and to create psychological distance between us and our thoughts, beliefs, memories, and self-stories. Defusing means that we understand that we have thoughts but that we are not our thoughts—and our thoughts are not necessarily indicators of what's real in the external world.

Mindfulness plays a big role here. It's essential to have a mindful awareness of our automatic mental chatter so that we're not hijacked by it and so that we're able to defuse and choose effective action. The defusion questionnaire in the Appendix (page 7) will help you assess your ability to defuse from your self-talk.

Step 5: Modify Self-Talk & Emotions In An Adaptive Way

The next step is to choose an effective strategy to modify our thoughts and emotions given the circumstances. Keep in mind that there's no one strategy that fits all situations, so you'll want to experiment and be flexible.

Below are some examples to get started on building your repertoire of self-regulation skills. Most of them can be used in

combination.

- **Acceptance:** Acceptance (discussed above) sometimes will be an effective and sufficient strategy on its own. Even when it's not, starting with acceptance will be beneficial given the harmful effects of suppression and avoidance.
- **Self-Compassion.** Provide compassionate self-support to yourself when working to cope with challenging emotions. Self-compassion may be especially effective as an initial strategy if you're feeling particularly down. It involves approaching yourself in a warm, non-critical manner and saying something like this: “[1. Express acceptance and support:] It's understandable that you feel this way. You're facing a challenging situation, and these feelings are natural. But I'm with you, and I'm going to help you. You're not alone. [2. Encourage yourself:] Come on, you can do this. You can pull yourself out of this mood. You have already accomplished so much; you'll also be able to deal with this. [3. Cheer yourself up: Give yourself a warm friendly smile internally and say things to yourself that are energizing and encouraging] [4. Say goodbye:]. I'll say goodbye for now, but I'll be back whenever you need me” (Diedrich et al., 2016).
- **Self-Distancing:** Increase your sense of objective distance, viewing events from a detached, third-person perspective.
- **Positive Distraction:** Do something or think about something positive that's unrelated to the stressful situation or emotion that you're feeling. This may be especially helpful as an initial strategy when your emotions are intense. A temporary distraction will give you time to cool off before engaging in more mentally demanding strategies, like cognitive reframing.
- **Social Support:** Talk to someone in your social network as a means to obtain advice and emotional support.
- **Cognitive Reframing:** Purposefully identify, challenge, and modify the distorted thinking that's causing your negative emotions (Diedrich et al., 2016). This strategy entails reinterpreting the stressful situation in a way that lessens its emotional impact by viewing it in a different light and adopting a more (realistically) optimistic perspective. For example, you might imagine yourself in the shoes of the

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET

person who contributed to the situation or assume their good intent, consider the low probability that anything really bad will happen, and consider the high probability that you'll be able to cope adequately no matter what happens.

Specifically, you might say something like, "I notice that I'm having a thought that I'm going to fail at this, make a fool out of myself, and maybe get fired." Then ask yourself the following questions.

- What are the consequences of thinking this way? How does it make me feel?
- Does this thought help me feel how I want to?
- And how does it influence my behavior when I think like that?
- Does this thought help me behave in the way I want?

Next, you might think about arguments and evidence for and against your negative self-talk:

- Is there evidence that the negative thought is true?
- Are there also arguments against the thought you're having? Have you had prior experiences that are inconsistent with it?
- How can you reformulate the thought in a more positive and helpful way? You may want to try out different versions until you find one that really makes you feel better.
- What's the worst thing that might happen if your thought was true? How likely is that to happen? Even if it does, what resources and skills do you have to cope adequately and be OK?

(Diedrich et al., 2016; Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Seligman, 1991).

Research has found that cognitive reframing is the most effective emotion regulation strategy (Webb et al., 2012). We can use it in most situations, but it isn't always appropriate. For example, when we have sufficient control or influence to change the stressful situation, then we shouldn't stop at cognitive reframing (Troy et al., 2013). We also should consider engaging in problem-solving and taking action to improve the situation.

Also, as noted above, if we're really worked up, we may need to calm down through positive distraction or other means as a preliminary strategy. The SSS template in the Appendix (pp. 7-8) walks through steps of the cognitive reframing process.

Step 6: Take Action Aligned With Your Values

The final step is to clarify your values and goals and align decisions and actions with them—even in the face of psychological obstacles. In other words, feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, or other negative inner experiences should not prevent us from moving forward in a direction consistent with our values and goals. For example:

- If you value having high-quality relationships with your friends and family, you'll need to tolerate the negative thoughts and emotions that crop up when you think about dragging yourself away from your work.
- If you value developing into an excellent lawyer, you'll need to continually choose stretch assignments—even though it may require you to tolerate feelings of anxiety and maybe even a little embarrassment.
- If you value cohesive relationships with your colleagues, you may need to tolerate the discomfort of foregoing the short-term joy of responding to a snarky email with an equally snarky response—and calm yourself down with a cognitive reframing exercise that gives your colleague the benefit of the doubt.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Shirzad Chamine, [Positive Intelligence: Why Only 20% of Teams and Individuals Achieve Their True Potential](#)

Russ Harris, [The Confidence Gap: A Guide to Overcoming Fear and Self-Doubt](#)

Steven C. Hayes, [Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life](#)

Alex Korb, [The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time](#)

Fredrik Livheim et al., [The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Stress Reduction](#)

Martin Seligman, [Learned Optimism](#)

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET: APPENDIX

MINDFULNESS SCALE (Non-Reactivity)

Please rate the following statements using the scale provided. Circle the number that best describes your own opinion of what is generally true for you.	Never	Almost Never	Some-times	Fairly Often	Very Often
I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them.	1	2	3	4	5
I watch my feelings without getting lost in them.	1	2	3	4	5
When I have distressing thoughts or images, I “step back” and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it.	1	2	3	4	5
In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting.	1	2	3	4	5
When I have distressing thoughts or images, I feel calm soon after.	1	2	3	4	5
When I have distressing thoughts or images I am able just to notice them without reacting.	1	2	3	4	5
When I have distressing thoughts or images, I just notice them and let them go.	1	2	3	4	5

This is the non-reactivity scale of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire-Short Form (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011). It measures an individual’s ability to remain calm and clear-minded when faced with thoughts or feelings that may usually elicit emotional responses. A higher score reflects lower reactivity—which contributes to greater well-being. A recent study found that this scale was the most important of the five mindfulness factors (observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity) for predicting workplace engagement and well-being (Malinowski & Lim, 2015).

DEFUSION

Below you will find a list of statements. Please rate how untrue or true each statement is for you by circling a number next to it.	Never True	Very Seldom True	Seldom True	Some-times True	Fre-quently True	Almost Always True	Always True
My thoughts cause me distress or emotional pain.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I get so caught up in my thoughts that I am unable to do the things that I most want to do.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I over-analyze situations to the point where it’s unhelpful to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I struggle with my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I get upset with myself for having certain thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I tend to get very entangled in my thoughts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It’s such a struggle to let go of upsetting thoughts even when I know that letting go would be helpful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

This is the Cognitive Defusion Questionnaire (Gillanders et al., 2014). Score the scale by summing the seven items. Higher scores reflect higher levels of cognitive fusion, which is related to depression and anxiety.

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET: APPENDIX

COGNITIVE REFRAMING: SSS TEMPLATE

Stressful Situation: Describe a recent Stressful Situation. Keep it objective and stick to the facts; no opinions.	
Self-Talk: What did you say to yourself in the moment? (Note that interpretations and self-talk often are automatic and lightning-fast. It might have happened so quickly that you don't even notice. So you'll need to slow down and pay close attention to your brain chatter.)	Surge: Emotions (what did you feel mentally?), Physical Sensations (what did you feel in your body), Behaviors (what did you do?)
Reflection: What did you learn from this? Was your negative self-talk helpful or harmful?	
Dispute Irrational Thoughts: Identify evidence that points to the accuracy and inaccuracy of your thoughts. Put it into perspective and generate a more optimistic belief about the Situation.	
My belief is not completely true because:	
An alternative, more accurate way of seeing this is:	
The most likely outcome will be:	
And I can take the following actions to handle it:	
Even if the worst-case scenario happened, it wouldn't be that bad or I'd still be OK because:	
Actions to Take Now?	

RESILIENT THINKING WORKSHEET: APPENDIX

COGNITIVE REFRAMING: SSS TEMPLATE – Example

Stressful Situation: Describe a recent Stressful Situation. Keep it objective and stick to the facts; no opinions.	
Hearing my words and idea come out of my supervisor's mouth (un-credited) in a meeting with important people.	
Self-Talk: What did you say to yourself in the moment?	Surge: Emotions (what did you feel mentally?), Physical Sensations (what did you feel in your body), Behaviors (what did you do?)
I can't believe you're sitting there saying that. Is she thinking about firing me? Does she really think it's her idea? What's wrong with me that my confidence is so low? Why does this bother me so much? She's quicker on her feet and more outgoing than I am.	Anger Anxiety Ego bruised Threatened & paranoid Raised heart rate, felt hot, stomach clenched, thoughts racing Spent time obsessing over it Avoided her
Reflection: What did you learn from this? Was your negative self-talk helpful or harmful?	
Getting carried away by my emotions made me ineffective in the meeting and made me feel mentally and physically bad. My automatic negative self-talk was harmful in the moment and also afterwards because I avoided her and kept obsessing about it.	
Dispute Irrational Thoughts: Identify evidence that points to the accuracy and inaccuracy of your thoughts. Put it into perspective and generate a more optimistic belief about the Situation.	
My belief is not completely true because: She has always been supportive of me in the past. I have no reason to believe that she's trying to get rid of me.	
An alternative, more accurate way of seeing this is: We're on the same team so she may viewed the idea as hers as well. Or she might just have forgotten who first came up with the idea.	
The most likely outcome will be: Nothing bad likely will happen and my contribution will become clear.	
And I can take the following actions to handle it: If I decide it's important, I can talk to her about it.	
Even if the worst-case scenario happened, it wouldn't be that bad or I'd still be OK because: The worst case scenario would be that she really is setting me up to fire me. This seems really unlikely but even if it happened, I could find another job and be fine. I have plenty of friends, family, and other resources to support me.	
Actions to Take Now? I'll ask her to lunch and explore what happened in a constructive, non-confrontational way.	



SPEAKER BIO

[Anne Brafford](#) (JD, MAPP, PhD Candidate) is a former equity partner at Morgan, Lewis, & Bockius LLP and the founder of Aspire, an education and consulting firm for the legal profession. She earned a Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) from University of Pennsylvania and has completed all but her dissertation for her doctoral degree in positive organizational psychology from Claremont Graduate University. Her focus is on the many aspects of law firm culture that boost engagement and well-being and avoid burnout, such as resilience, meaningful work, positive leadership, high-quality motivation, advancement of women lawyers, and more.

Anne is the author of an ABA-published book titled [Positive Professionals](#) and is the Chair of the ABA Law Practice Division's Attorney Well-Being Committee. She was the Editor in Chief and co-author of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being's recent report: [The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change](#) and is the founder and Chair of [Lawyer Well-Being Week](#). Anne also was appointed by the two most recent ABA Presidents to the Presidential Working Group formed to investigate how legal employers can support healthy work environments. In her work with that group, Anne created the freely-available [ABA Well-Being Toolkit for Lawyers and Legal Employers](#).



www.aspire.legal | abrafford@aspire.legal