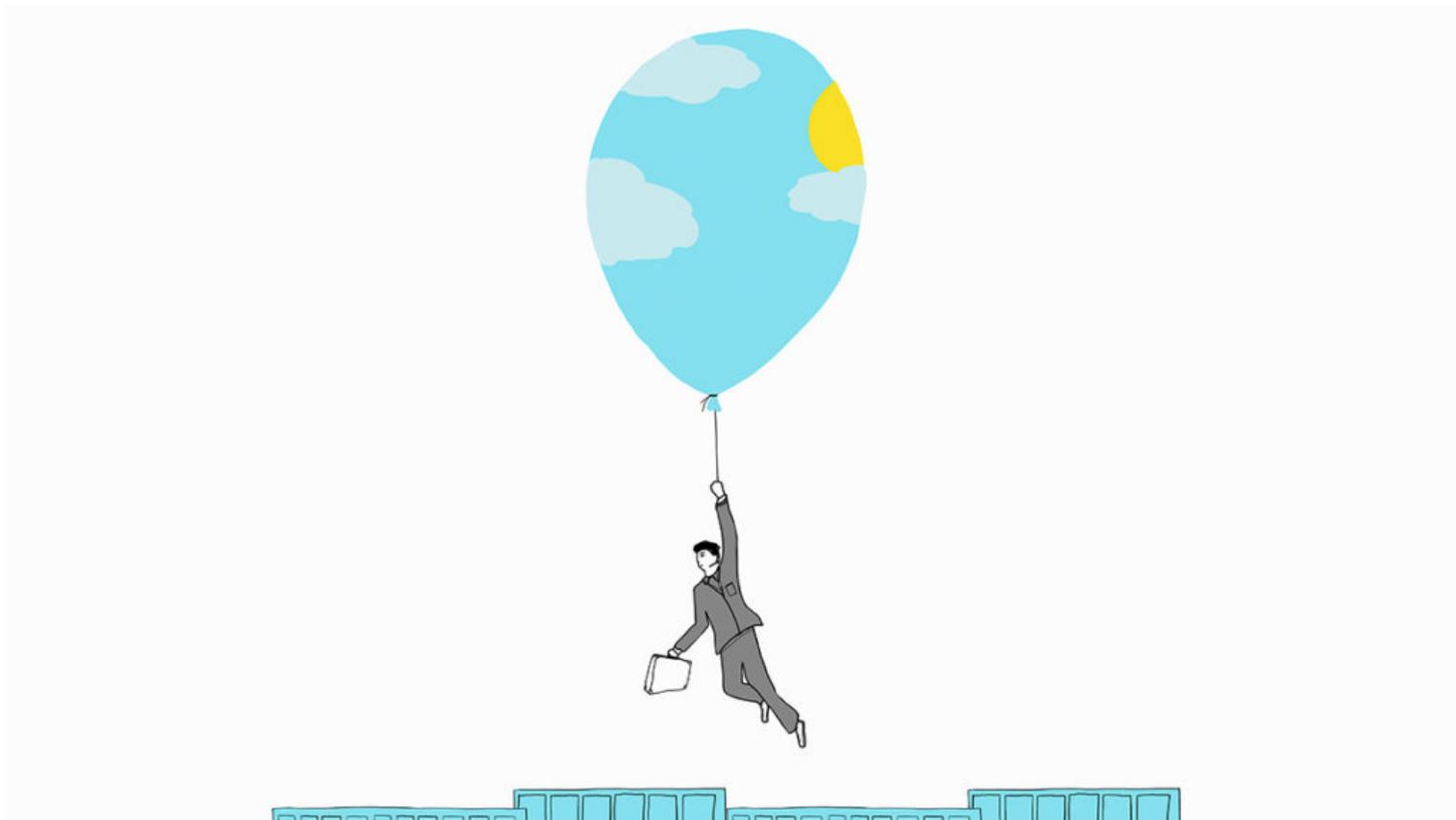


MANAGING YOURSELF

Resilience for the Rest of Us

by Daniel Goleman

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There are two ways to become more resilient: one by talking to yourself, the other by retraining your brain.

If you've suffered a major failure, take the sage advice given by psychologist Martin Seligman in the HBR article "Building Resilience." Talk to yourself. Give yourself a cognitive intervention and counter defeatist thinking with an optimistic attitude. Challenge your downbeat thinking and replace it with a positive outlook.

But, fortunately, major failures come along rarely in life.

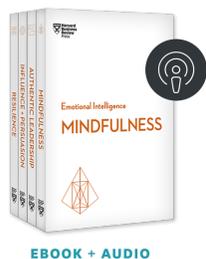
What about bouncing back from the more frequent annoying screwups, minor setbacks and irritating upsets that are routine in any leader's life? Resilience is, again, the answer — but with a different flavor. You need to retrain your brain.

The brain has a very different mechanism for bouncing back from the cumulative toll of daily hassles. And with a little effort, you can upgrade its ability to snap back from life's downers.

Whenever we get so upset we say or do something we later regret (and who doesn't now and then?), that's a sure sign that our amygdala — the brain's radar for danger, and the trigger for the fight-or-flight response — has hijacked the brain's executive centers in the prefrontal cortex. The neural key to resilience lies in how quickly we recover from that hijacked state.

The circuitry that brings us back to full energy and focus after an amygdala hijack concentrates in the left side of our prefrontal area, finds Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin. He's also found that when we're distressed, there's heightened activity on the right side of the prefrontal area. Each of us has a characteristic level of left/right activity that predicts our daily mood range — if we're tilted to the right, more upsets; if to the left, quicker recovery from distress of all kinds.

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To tackle this in the workplace, Davidson teamed with the CEO of a high-pressure, 24/7, biotech startup and Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn offered the employees at the biotech outfit instruction in mindfulness, an attention-training method that teaches the brain to register anything happening in

the present moment with full focus — but without reacting.

The instructions are simple:

1. Find a quiet, private place where you can be undistracted for a few minutes — for instance, close your office door and mute your phone.
2. Sit comfortably, with your back straight but relaxed.
3. Focus your awareness on your breath, staying attentive to the sensations of the inhalation and exhalation, and start again on the next breath.
4. Do not judge your breathing or try to change it in any way.
5. See anything else that comes to mind as a distraction — thoughts, sounds, whatever — let them go and return your attention to your breath.

After eight weeks, and an average 30 minutes a day of practicing mindfulness, the employees had shifted their ratio from tilted toward the stressed-out right side to the resilient left side. What's more, they said they remembered what they loved about their work — they got in touch with what had brought them energy in the first place.

To get the full benefit, a daily practice of 20 to 30 minutes works best; think of it like a mental exercise routine. It can be very helpful to have guided instructions, but the key is to find a slot for it in your daily routine. (There are even instructions for using a long drive as your practice session.)

Mindfulness has been steadily gaining credence among hard-nosed executives. There are several centers where mindfulness instruction has been tailored for businesspeople, from tony resorts like Miraval to programs in mindful leadership at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. Google University has been offering a course on mindfulness to employees for years.

Might you benefit from tuning up your brain's resilience circuitry by learning mindfulness? Among high-performing executives, the impacts of stress can be subtle. My colleagues Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee suggest as a rough diagnostic of leadership

stress asking yourself, “Do I have a vague sense of unease, restlessness, or the feeling that life is not great (a higher standard than “good enough”)?” A bit of mindfulness might put your mind at ease.

Daniel Goleman is Co-Director of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University, co-author of [Primal Leadership: Leading with Emotional Intelligence](#), and, most recently, author of [The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights](#).

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