

How To Grow Resilience Through Mindfulness & Dreaming

In scary and uncertain times, there are resources for greater resilience.

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During tough times, resilience grows from mindfulness and dreams.

"Are we there yet?" is an age-old lament of children in cars and a siren call for these times of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest.

Sometimes, the driving parent responds, "In one hour," or the famous, "Go to sleep and I'll take a shortcut."

In my experience, rarely does the parent say, "I have no idea, I had to take an unexpected detour," or even, "We're lost, so I don't know."

These days, we're stuck with that last one. And the best we can do when our children, friends, or loved ones ask, "Are we there yet?" is to say, "Not really. But we'll get there."

We're tired, we're worried, we're grieving, and we're so done with quarantine.

Yet, we know that social distancing, wearing a mask, and being really careful is still the best we've got until we are "there" — a well-tested working vaccine that's widely available.

Being stuck in uncertainty is one of the more profoundly disquieting and uncomfortable emotional states to be in. We crave the certainty of knowing — we're wired for it.

We even see some of our leaders acting like they know things for sure, since they can't tolerate both the not knowing themselves or looking like they don't know.

Can dark times bring gifts?

Both good self-care and good parenting enhance your ability to live with uncertainty. You can carry on in life with more equanimity, compassion for yourself and others, and an enhanced ability to tolerate uncomfortable emotional states without unraveling.

Poet Mary Oliver wrote, "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me many years to understand that this, too, was a gift."

Spiritual teachers across time and cultures tell us to look for illumination paradoxically within the heart of darkness. When we reach deep inside ourselves, the darkness contained both within us and without can be illuminated.

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How can we find the hidden gifts in the times of darkness? As hard as it is, without the darkness, we cannot fully appreciate the light.

The role of the unknown and of the mystery is an integral part of the creative process, so perhaps we can tap into our own creative spaces at this time to learn things that have been waiting in the depths of our souls for enough space and quiet to be discovered.

Fear can hijack our imaginations and create even more frightening scenarios. Fear and worry wear us out and use up our precious inner strength that we could put to better use.

Faith and courage are about going forward, even without all the paths being clear. They're not about the absence of fear, but rather moving forward with your highest values and your life purpose — in spite of the fear.

Psychological trauma and the "window of tolerance."

There is a psychological concept in trauma treatment called the "window of tolerance." This concept implies is that we all have a certain threshold or window of emotional states within which we can still function well.

If our personal window is too narrow, our reactions and responses overflow outside of that window. We go to the unhealthy extremes of "too much" or "too little."

Too much or too high outside our window, and we get anxious, angry, act out, become addicted, and harmful to ourself or others.

Too little or too low outside that window, and we are prone to depression, sadness, isolating, numbness, and dissociation.

Healing and living with uncertainty requires us to learn better skills to tolerate these common yet uncomfortable emotional states. We must learn to expand our window.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficulties, and the more skills we have to ride out the uncomfortable emotions, the better our resilience.

Tuning to our values and to our life purpose help us to tolerate uncomfortable feelings and to expand our windows.

Mindfulness skills and resilience.

Some of the skills of mindfulness help us with resilience. Learning to bring our focus on our breath and notice the in-breathe, the out-breathe, and the pause that naturally happens between the two is one form of slowing down and calming down.

"Externalizing" or putting your internal thoughts, obsessions, and ruminations outside of yourself, instead of inside of your head also helps us gain some healthy distance from them.

For example, when you notice yourself in a worry cycle, name it: "Ah, worry." And then visualize putting the worry outside yourself, perhaps in one of those thought bubbles we see in cartoons, clearing the space in your head.

You can float that bubble away – or at the very least, examine it more dispassionately as you now have some distance from it. It's outside of you now, rather than inside of you.

Shifting your focus and attention to the sound of the birds, the smell of coffee, or the beauty of the sunset and flowers allows us to find a haven of peace – a home base of comfort and calm within turbulent times.

For example, I was on a Zoom call with a client last week. She was sitting on her porch at home, and I was in my home office with the windows open.

In the midst of discussing her insomnia and the stress it was causing, a cardinal broke into song outside her porch. As if hearing it in response, an answering trill of cardinal notes sounded outside my office window.

We could both hear the birds at each other's respective homes, and were able to pause in that delightful synchronicity and enjoyment before going back to solving the problem about her sleep and processing her nightmares.

Dream sharing to find home again: Expanding your window.

In addition to COVID-19, we've been experiencing an epidemic of upsetting dreams and nightmares.

Rather than ignoring them, we can "lean in," as Cheryl Sandberg would tell us, and find the hidden gifts and knowledge that they're bringing.

This is another way of expanding our window.

Tuning in to our intuitions and synchronicities — both forms of waking dream states, as well as our nighttime dreams — allows us to process and thus metabolize our worries and fears, rather than simply becoming overwhelmed by them.

And when you share your dreams with others, you have the benefits of two, three, or five ideas being better than one.

We can all resonate with each other's dreams and learn something for ourselves from the dreams of another. This is one of the powers of working in a dream group or dream circle.

And since dreams are such a ubiquitous topic these days, you have even more permission and social acceptance than usual for discussing your dreams with both friends and professionals.

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