

Jo Owen

resilience

**10 habits
to thrive in
life and work**

Praise for *Resilience*

'I challenge anyone to read through it, highlight the lines that resonate and make sense, and then stand back and see what is left ... there won't be much.'

MARK EVANS MBE, FOUNDER, THE UNIVERSITY OF THE
DESERT; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OUTWARD BOUND OMAN;
ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY GEOGRAPHICAL AWARD WINNER.

'Highly readable wisdom travelling along the all-important road to resilience.'

DAVID STEPHEN, CHIEF RISK OFFICER, WESTPAC

'Essential for anyone who is interested in learning how to handle pressure or support other people who are facing challenging circumstances.'

RODERIC YAPP, LEADERSHIP FORCES

'A highly practical guide that takes you from setbacks to success. The advice rings true to experience.'

LEON TAYLOR OLYMPIC MEDALLIST,
BBC COMMENTATOR; EXECUTIVE COACH

'This book has captured so many ideas that we can all learn from, to cope with any challenges that we are faced within life. We can choose to use these challenges to help us thrive and become stronger.'

WENDY CASSON, HEADTEACHER,
EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY, BLACKPOOL

'*Resilience* offers us practical wisdom, packaged in bite-sized chunks, to help us meet life's challenges with clarity, perspective and agency, and without depleting our emotional and physical energy.'

BAILLIE AARON, FOUNDER, SPARK INSIDE

in and know my strengths and weaknesses.” Her resilience draws on experience and learning (Chapter 9), reaching out and working with experienced mountaineers (Chapter 5), a high degree of goal focus (Chapter 8) and self-efficacy (Chapter 4).

“We always have choices, even if they are uncomfortable choices.”

The table below illustrates the differences between flexible and inflexible thinking, and between self-enhancing and self-defeating beliefs.

	Self-defeating	Self-enhancing
Flexible	<i>Pessimism</i> I prefer not to trust people The world is a risky place I dislike asking for help	<i>Optimism and growth</i> I prefer to trust and respect people I like to learn and grow It is worth making an effort
Inflexible	<i>Victim mindset</i> Never trust anyone No one likes me I am a victim of cruel fate	<i>Narcissism, over achievement</i> I must win/succeed/be perfect I must be liked by everyone I must be in charge

In practice, your beliefs are your beliefs. Changing your beliefs is the same as changing who you are. Maybe that is what you either want or need to do, in which case you may well be able to help make a psychotherapist rich. It takes time, hard work and a lot of support to change your beliefs.

You have a simpler option, which lets you remain as you are, does not require a long course of psychotherapy and is fast. It is about helping yourself become more flexible and adaptable to different situations. It is a wonderful way to use adversity. Every time you find yourself over-reacting to a small event, the chances are that

you have just encountered one of your iceberg beliefs. These are your deep beliefs, which help you most of the time but sometimes hole you beneath the water line.

“Changing your beliefs is the same as changing who you are.”

Use each iceberg event to reveal more about your iceberg beliefs. These events are often the only way you find out what your iceberg beliefs are, so they are very valuable to you. If you are annoyed or upset by an event, use the event to your advantage: identify your beliefs that caused you to be upset. You can then modify them if you think they need modification. You do not need to abandon your beliefs: you need to identify them and identify the circumstances where they may or may not work for you.

For instance, I have an iceberg belief that respect is earned not given. What's not to like about that? It means that I have to work hard to prove myself the whole time. When I chair various boards, I never assume that I deserve respect: respect comes from doing a good job, not from your title. But even this apparently innocent belief has a dark side. It means that I have a complete lack of respect for authority or arbitrary rules. Just because someone is in power does not mean they have to be respected if they act stupidly.

That is a recipe for getting into trouble repeatedly, with both important people and with petty officials who enforce dumb rules. It was a catastrophic belief to have at school. The violent reaction of teachers to my lack of respect for some of them simply reinforced my belief that respect should be earned, not given. That is the nature of beliefs: we interpret events in such a way that they are constantly reinforced. This is called confirmation bias and it creates a validation loop that is hard to escape.

So I have identified my iceberg belief and I am happy to live with it. But now I know that there are circumstances where it is not a helpful belief. Slowly, I have learned to modify my belief. So now I recognise that although respect should be earned and power should

be obeyed (even if not respected), that then becomes consistent with other personal beliefs such as that conflict is undesirable.

The key is to understand where your beliefs help or hinder you. This is a process of discovery. If you make it a process of purposeful discovery, you can introduce flexibility into your thinking so that you react appropriately in different contexts. Examples of how beliefs help and hinder in different contexts are in the table below.

By definition, most of your iceberg beliefs exist beneath the surface and are hard to find. This section gives you two exercises to help you find and challenge your iceberg beliefs.



Exercise 11: identify your iceberg beliefs

Below is a table with some of the more common iceberg beliefs. Review the table and see if you have any of the beliefs. All of them have positive consequences which will help you most of the time. They also have negative consequences which can trip you up occasionally. If you have none of these beliefs, you can use the table below as a prompt to think about what iceberg beliefs you do have, and then think about how they help you most of the time and how they might hinder you sometimes.

This exercise is fundamentally about building awareness. Once you are aware that you may have some iceberg beliefs, you can start to manage them. If you are not aware of them, you become a prisoner of their consequences.

Belief	Positive consequence	Negative consequence
Failure is a sign of weakness	Determined to achieve	Avoid taking risky or stretching roles
I must be liked	Collegial and kind	Inability to start difficult conversations (about performance, expectations, etc.)

Belief	Positive consequence	Negative consequence
Conflict is undesirable	Cooperative and amenable	Failure to stand up to bullies and conflict, easy pushover
Respect is earned not given	Work, achievement focus	Lack of respect for authority and arbitrary rules lead to trouble
My time is valuable	Work hard	Easily irritated by queues and other people
Women should be kind and supportive	Helpful team player	Failure to stand up for own interests
A real man never shows emotion	Strong task focus	Unresolved anguish, low emotional intelligence in dealing with colleagues
A real man never quits	Perseverance in the face of adversity	Persist where it is dangerous (on a mountain) or dysfunctional (in a bad job)
Anyone who disagrees with my faith or politics is evil	Commitment to a cause	Lapse into violence and extremism
Follow your passion	Potential to achieve excellence	What effect will this have on your family?
Integrity is everything	Strong role model	Intolerance of others

Belief	Positive consequence	Negative consequence
Colleagues are in it for themselves and cannot be trusted	Politically astute	Working alone, failure to build networks of support
I must be respected	Strive to do the right thing	Quick to take offence
Hard work leads to success	Hard work	Reluctance to deal with politics of work
My wedding or birthday should be perfect	Focus on creating a magical day	Disappointment and tears with any minor setback or blemish



Exercise 12: challenge your iceberg beliefs

Often it is not possible to identify iceberg beliefs until you hit the iceberg. These are the moments in life when things go wrong for you. Although painful, these moments are highly valuable. They are a great opportunity to spot your iceberg belief and then challenge it so that you can deal with it more productively in future.

You can challenge your iceberg beliefs in a structured way. Here is a three-step approach for managing your iceberg beliefs productively. It is an exercise worth doing with someone else who can ask you the questions in step two. The act of talking through your answers normally reveals a clarity that is not there when the windmills of your mind are spinning round and round.

- 1. Stop:** Be aware of your reactions. Awareness is the gateway to choice and control. It is too easy to dismiss an adverse event as

bad luck or to blame it on another person. But if you reacted in an unhelpful way, you were making choices that caused that to happen. That is a good moment to stop yourself, but not to blame yourself. Simply note that you had an unhelpful reaction to a difficult situation.

2. **Reflect:** Identify the iceberg belief that caused you to react that way. Ask yourself some simple 'what' questions, in any order:

- What was the worst part of that for me?
- What does that mean to me?
- What was the most upsetting part of that for me?
- Assuming all that is true, what makes that so upsetting to me now?

These questions will let you be open and honest with yourself. Asking yourself why it all went wrong just leads to post-rationalisation and defensiveness, even in your own internal chatter. Asking the what questions allows you to blow off steam, while revealing the iceberg thought at the same time.

3. **Refine:** Identify how you can adapt your belief to make it more flexible and suit different situations better. You should not attack your belief. It is better to understand your belief than to judge it. You can do this by asking three questions, in order:

- Where has that belief helped you in the past? Reinforce to yourself that your beliefs have value, at least in some circumstances. Be specific about how it has helped you.
- How did it not help you on this occasion?
- How could you adapt the belief to make it more helpful to you in similar situations in future?

In workshops, the hardest and most productive step is step two. It is the moment where clarity comes out and step three becomes easy. In real life, the hardest step is step 1: take time to stop and to catch yourself thinking in a way that is unhelpful. Simply stopping and challenging yourself is very powerful.