



to Unraveled Unrivaled

Embracing the Four
Dimensions of Resilience™

BY JERRY LERNER, MD

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Resilience

This is a book about resilience, what it is, how we lose it, and how we reclaim it. Resilience is a fancy word for living your best life in all ways possible—resilient biology, resilient emotional tone, resilient thinking, and resilient interconnections.

The Japanese have a proverb, “Nana korobi, ya oki” that roughly translates to “fall down seven times, get up eight.”

Nat King Cole sang about it beautifully in *Pick Yourself Up*: “Nothing’s impossible I have found/for when my chin is on the ground/I pick myself up/dust myself off/start all over again.”ⁱ

Life has its ups and downs. Sometimes it’s like the gentle waves of a peaceful lake. Other times it feels like a Tsunami. On a daily basis we navigate these ups and downs. When things are tough, what choice do we have but to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and start all over again? Yet, there are times in everyone’s life when getting up and moving forward seems daunting. Resilience is what keeps us going. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through

mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.”

*Resilience is synonymous with life.
All life is born soft and supple.
In death all becomes stiff and hard.
The hard and stiff will become broken.
The soft and supple will prevail. ⁱⁱ*

~ Adapted from Steven Mitchell’s translation of Tao Te Ching

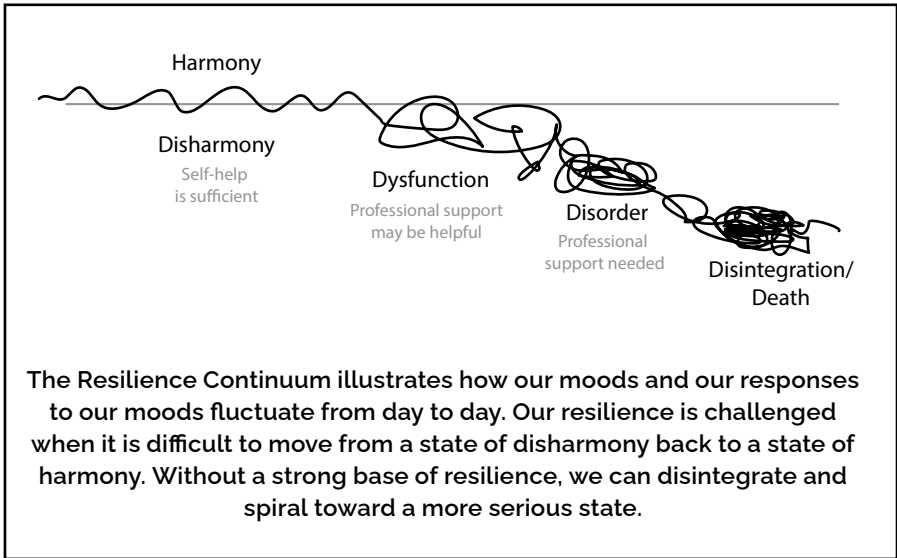
If resilience has the qualities of energy—flexibility and forward motion, loss of resilience is more like inertia; an object at rest stays at rest, and an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. With loss of resilience we feel stuck, an “object at rest,” unable to find the energy to move forward. Or, our lives are heading in the wrong direction, as an “object in motion,” careening in a negative trajectory, unable to make corrections. Applying the principles and strategies presented in the second section of this book creates that “outside force,” which resolves inertia, restoring and sustaining resilience. Without the understanding, tools, and strategies required to maintain resilience, we find ourselves at risk of declining health, physical and emotional distress, and loss of hope and direction.

Emotional pain, tragedy and loss are unavoidable experiences in life. For me, my deepest despair was the murder of my son, Gabriel. Gabe had an amazing future ahead of him. He had graduated college with honors, completed law school at a prestigious university, and had just obtained a position as law clerk to a wonderful federal judge. One Sunday he was on his way to do volunteer work with youth and kindly stopped on a rural road to give two strangers a ride. They assaulted him and then shot him. As I write this, 14 years have passed. The loss will always impact me.

Having resilience does not mean it will be easy nor that it will erase all of our suffering. Sometimes it just means getting through the days until we find ourselves again. I have experienced much emotional pain and, yet, I have created a life that is generally happy and healthy enough to hold the loss and the love for my son. There are no secrets here. My survival requires me to utilize every resilience tool in my toolbox. Ongoing and repeatedly, early on and still, it is the support of friends and family who show compassion and caring around my waves of intense emotions. It is finding my way through a grieving process that, even though it has improved, never goes away. For me, it is about having a sense of meaning and purpose in the world while maintaining a sense of humor. It also requires a heightened level of self-care, managing stress levels, exercising regularly, and just taking time to listen to my needs.

I have come to understand that resilience isn't some fluffy New Age, self-help slogan. It is work and can be messy, but even in the hardest of times, it is the work we are called to do; and it is the only way through to the other side. My own efforts to survive and thrive through my loss are woven into the fabric of this book, as is the spirit of my son, Gabriel.

One way to conceptualize resilience is to look at it as a continuum. At best our lives move between a state of harmony (peaceful, happy, content) and disharmony (stressed, challenged, discontent).



Dysfunction can present in myriad ways, such as decreased energy and enthusiasm, overuse of alcohol or other addictive substances, or simply loss of joy and pleasure with life. Dysfunctional living, when unaddressed, spirals downward to a chaotic disordered state, a more perilous form of inertia. This can include psychological disorders, such as depression and generalized anxiety—or physical disorders, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Disorders related to loss of resilience, if not effectively cared for, lead to a breakdown of the system. This manifests as degenerative conditions, such as premature aging, serious physical and psychological breakdown, and even death.

Embracing the Four Dimensions of Resilience (4DRs) is the process of reversing the downward spiral—whether from the unavoidable moments of disharmony or the longer journey of recovery from disorders back to restored well-being. Wherever you are in the resilience continuum, the correct time to invest in resilience is now. Like a savings account, the longer we make regular “deposits” the more we have available when needed.

The word resilience appears often in this book. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say “resiliences.” I have come to understand through my education, personal experience, and three decades of working with patients and clients, that there are multiple dimensions of resilience that, when synergized, maximize health and well-being. It would be even more accurate to make the word into a verb, “resiliencing,” since, as you will discover in this book, creating and sustaining resilience is an active, ongoing process.

If you Google the word resilience you will discover an abundance of books and articles on the subject. These can all be helpful in their own right; however, most address only one or perhaps two of the aspects of resilience. They imply by omission that they are discussing the totality of resilience. For example, some writings will talk about resilience as a psychological quality, while others focus on resilience biologically; and yet others suggest that having meaning and purpose is the driving force behind resilience.

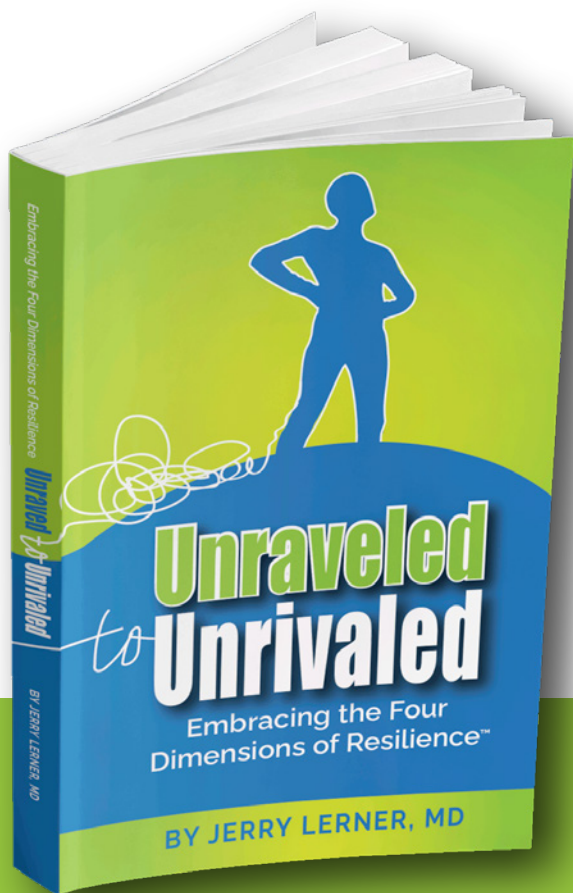
This book proposes that there are Four Dimensions of Resilience. These dimensions are distinct, yet entirely interwoven. It was only through working through the difficulties of my own life, my involvement with hundreds of patients and clients who trusted me with their lives and struggles, and the incessant question in my head—why do some people recover from their adversities and others don’t?—that I was able to puzzle this together.



The Four Dimensions

DR1	DR2	DR3	DR4
Resilient Biology	Resilient Emotional Tone	Resilient Thinking	Resilient Connections
The lifestyle choices and habits needed for optimal health and energy.	The capacity to minimize time in survival mode and maximize time being present and creative.	The ability to think compassionately towards ourselves and to focus on positive goals.	Connecting with ourselves, connecting with others in positive, supportive relationships, and connecting to the world through meaning, purpose or passion.

In the following four chapters we will explore the loss of resilience in greater depth. We will see how and why many of us disconnect from the cycle of harmony/disharmony, spiraling downward to states of dysfunction and disorder. In part two of the book, I will lay out all the strategies and tools that give us the capacity to reverse that cycle and sustain a resilient life.



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"Dr. Lerner expertly and gently provides an easy-to-understand-and-apply prescription for restored health, hope and joy via the principle of resilience."

*~ David Anderson, Ph.D
Licensed Psychologist*

Former Executive Director, Sierra Tucson and The Meadows