BUILDING A RESILIENT CULTURE

Building resilience into the rhythm of work, for individuals and the leaders who support them

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood

RESILIENCE IS NOT A SOLO SPORT

When we talk about resilience at work, we usually talk about individuals. Who copes well. Who bounces back. Who seems to handle pressure without missing a beat.

But resilience is not just something people bring to work. It is something work either builds or wears down.

Two people with the same skills and the same personal strength can have very different experiences depending on the team around them. One works somewhere that makes it normal to prepare, pause, recover and learn. The other works somewhere that only values the push.

We see it this way:

Resilient Culture = Embracing Humanness × Leadership Support

Embracing humanness is what each of us brings. It means being honest about where we are right now, accepting that we will have hard days, and using deliberate tools to prepare, recover and grow. When we feel off or stressed, it affects our ability to read situations, make decisions and respond with confidence. Pretending otherwise does not make us stronger.

Leadership support is what makes that possible. It is clear expectations, realistic workloads and a team where it is normal to pause, recover and talk honestly about how things are going.

The two are multiplied, not added, so a zero on either side brings the whole thing down. People cannot do it alone, and leaders cannot do it for them.

Before going further, it is worth pausing on two questions:

What brought you into this work?

What keeps you here?

Knowing your answers provides a protective layer. On the hardest days, your reasons for doing this work are part of what keeps you steady. And touching base with them, even briefly, each day does more than protect you. It refuels you. Purpose is not just something we lean on when things get hard; it is one of the things that gives us energy to keep going.

RESILIENCE AS A CYCLE

Our performance cycle has four stages: **Get Ready. Go. Get It Back. Grow.**

Most workplaces are good at preparing the work. We prepare for the client, the project, the presentation and the deadline. We are far less deliberate about preparing the human who must deliver it. Then we perform and move straight on to the next thing. Recovery and reflection are the stages most often skipped, and they are exactly where resilience is built.

The cycle plays out on two levels at work. It happens within a single day, or even a single meeting or call. And it happens across bigger seasons: a major project, a busy quarter, a restructure or a difficult year.

In each stage, there is something individuals can do for themselves, and something leaders can do to make it easier. That shared responsibility is what turns individual coping into a resilient culture.

GET READY

Most of us walk into work already carrying something. A tough morning at home, a poor sleep, a worry we have not had time to think about. What happens off the job affects what happens on the job, and the reverse is true too.

Getting ready means starting the day on purpose rather than by accident.

FOR YOU

Check in on the way in. On your commute, notice how you are feeling. Not how you think you should feel. How you are.

Treat today as a new day. Ask yourself: *What do I need to give myself the best chance of having a*

good or meaningful day?

Decide who you want to be. Before your first meeting or task, choose how you want to show up, regardless of what comes at you.

Build a transition. Take five minutes to move from your home self to your work self. Leave a few minutes early to avoid a rushed arrival. Play a song or podcast that puts you in a good frame of mind. Or, as you walk into the building, notice five things around you.

FOR LEADERS

Make expectations clear. Uncertainty drains energy before the work even begins. People prepare best when they know what matters most today.

Start with a check-in. A quick round at the beginning of a meeting ("One word for how you are arriving today") helps people transition and tells you where your team is.

Look ahead together. Identify the heavy weeks, deadlines and pressure points in advance, and plan for them as a team rather than leaving each person to cope alone.

Acknowledge the whole person. Make it okay for people to say when something outside of work is affecting them. You cannot support what you do not know about.

GO

Go is the work itself: the meetings, the deadlines, the difficult conversations and the moments when you must perform on demand.

It helps to know what your best looks like. Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz describe performance in terms of energy (high or low) and how that energy feels (positive or negative). Our ideal performance state is usually high energy that feels positive: engaged, focused and confident.

We can drift out of it in two directions. **Too far over**, we see muscle tension, frantic energy, doubt and more mistakes. **Too far under**, we see low energy, distraction, low motivation and disengagement. Knowing your own signs of each lets you adjust before the day gets away from you.

FOR YOU

Focus on the controllables. Attention spent on what you cannot control rarely helps you move forward.

Use coping statements. A short phrase can remind you what you need in the moment: *Breathe.* or *I can handle difficult moments.*

Build in reminders. Take a few deep breaths after every call or meeting. Keep a cue card in your desk or bag that brings you back to something good from earlier in the day.

Practise micro-recovery. Create small spaces for your humanness between tasks and conversations. Even a minute counts.

Lean on the 4 C's. Building on Suzanne Kobasa's research on hardiness, we use four anchors for staying steady under pressure:

Control. Put your energy into what is within your control.

Commitment. Remember why you are doing what you are doing. It will keep you grounded through the ebbs and flows.

Connection. Know who is on your real team and make sure that team includes yourself.

Challenge. There will always be obstacles. Rather than running from them, ask what you can learn and how you can improve.

FOR LEADERS

Protect focus. Fewer interruptions, clearer priorities and realistic workloads make it easier for people to stay in their best zone.

Watch for over and under. Rising tension, frantic emails, withdrawal or quietness can all be early signs that someone is drifting out of their zone. Check in early.

Model the pause. When leaders take a breath between meetings or step away for a few minutes, it gives everyone else permission to do the same.

Notice what is done well under pressure. Ask your team to describe a tough situation they thought a colleague handled superbly. Recognizing good work in hard moments builds confidence and connection at the same time.

GET IT BACK

Recovery is not a reward for finishing the work. It is part of the work.

When people move from one demand to the next without ever coming back down, the cost adds up

quietly: shorter tempers, poorer sleep, slower thinking and less patience at home. Over time, people move from healthy to hurt, and sometimes from hurt to injured.

As sport psychologist Cal Botterill put it, "Looking after yourself first may be the most unselfish thing you ever do."

FOR YOU

Close the workday on purpose. Before you leave, take a few deep breaths. Then take five minutes to move from your work self back to your home self.

Decide how you will be present. Think about what you will do to be focused on yourself, or on the people you love, when you get home.

Plan your recovery. Put an evening moment for recovery in your calendar, just as you would a meeting. Who will be involved? What will you need? What would let you fully engage in it?

Lean on your support team. Your support team is not just at work. It includes the people outside of work who care about you. When you talk with them after a hard day, it can help to:

> **Zoom out.** What is the impact of this within the week? The year? Your career? Your life?
>
> **Focus on the process.** There is never a perfect day. Where can your attention go to the process instead of the outcome?
>
> **Make space to feel it.** Notice the urge to fix things or act normal right away. Give yourself room to experience what happened and the emotions that came with it.
>
> *Who is on your support team? What do you need from them?*

FOR LEADERS

Make recovery normal. Talk about breaks, time off and slower periods as part of high performance, not a lack of commitment.

Stop rewarding the never-ending push. If the people who answer emails at midnight are the ones who get praised, the team learns that recovery is a weakness.

Protect real downtime. Respect evenings, weekends and vacations. Where possible, follow intense periods with lighter ones.

FOR LEADERS

Check in after hard moments. When someone has had a difficult call, meeting or week, reach out. Lead with empathy rather than sympathy: connect with how they are feeling instead of rushing to make it better or look on the bright side.

Be honest about constraints. Sometimes what weighs on people is not just what happened, but what could not be done. Acknowledging the limits of the system, rather than leaving people to carry them alone, matters.

GROW

Experience alone does not make us stronger. What we do with it does.

Growth is where a hard day turns into something useful, and where a team becomes more capable together rather than just more tired.

Growth can come even from the hardest experiences. Researchers Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun describe post-traumatic growth: the positive changes some people experience after significant struggle. These include a deeper appreciation for life, closer relationships, new possibilities, a greater sense of personal strength and a deeper understanding of what they believe.

Growth does not erase the difficulty. It sits alongside it.

FOR YOU

Reflect before you reset. At the end of the day or after a big moment, ask yourself:

> *What went well, what am I proud of or what did I enjoy?*
>
> *What do I want to do differently next time, and how?*
>
> *What did I learn?*
>
> *What do I need to forgive myself for?*

Be kind in your review. Kristin Neff describes self-compassion as treating ourselves with the same compassion we give to others. Honest reflection is far more useful when it is not delivered with a harsh inner voice.

Notice what you can depend on. What are the people, habits and practices that reliably help you

grow? Keep them close.

FOR LEADERS

Debrief and transition. After a major project, a difficult event or a tough week, bring the team together and ask:

What happened, and what can we learn about both the people side and the technical side?

How can we make sense of this?

What do we need most, right now?

Keep it about learning, not blame. When people trust that reviews are about improving the system, they share more honestly, and the team learns faster.

Close the loop. Show people how their lessons changed something. Nothing builds commitment to reflection like seeing it make a difference.

Celebrate the growth, not just the result. Recognize how people handled a hard season, not just whether the numbers came out right.

THE TAKEAWAY

Resilience is not about toughing it out alone.

It is built in the rhythm of each day and each season: how we get ready, how we show up, how we recover and what we learn.

Individuals can bring the tools. Leaders can make it normal to use them. Together, that is what creates a resilient culture.

The stakes are high. How will you be intentional about each stage?

Get ready. Go. Get it back. Grow.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

References

Brown, B. (2013). *Brené Brown on empathy* [Video]. RSA.

Kobasa, S. C. (1979). Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*(1), 1–11.

Leslie-Toogood, A., & Ludwick, D. (2025). *Get ready. Go. Get it back. Grow.* Toogood Consulting.

Loehr, J., & Schwartz, T. (2003). *The power of full engagement: Managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal.* Free Press.

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself.* William Morrow.

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry, 15*(1), 1–18.

QUICK GUIDES

Two sides of a resilient culture. Keep the one that fits you close by.

STAYING WELL AT WORK

For individuals

1. Get Ready

- Check in with how you are really feeling on your way in.
- Ask: *What do I need to have a good or meaningful day?*
- Decide who you want to be today.
- Take five minutes to move from home self to work self.

2. Go

- Know your signs of being too far over or too far under.
- Focus on what you can control.
- Use a coping statement: *Breathe.* or *I can handle difficult moments.*
- Take a few breaths between meetings, calls or tasks.
- Remember the 4 C's: control, commitment, connection, challenge.

3. Get It Back

- Take five minutes to move from work self to home self.
- Plan one recovery moment each evening.
- Talk with your support team: zoom out, focus on the process, make space to feel it.

4. Grow

- What went well? What am I proud of?
- What will I do differently next time, and how?
- What did I learn?
- What do I need to forgive myself for?

BUILDING A RESILIENT TEAM

For leaders

1. Get Ready

- Make priorities and expectations clear.
- Open meetings with a quick check-in.
- Plan for heavy weeks and pressure points together.
- Make it okay to share what is happening outside of work.

2. Go

- Protect focus and keep workloads realistic.
- Watch for early signs of people drifting over or under.
- Model taking a pause between demands.
- Recognize work done well under pressure.

3. Get It Back

- Talk about recovery as part of high performance.
- Stop rewarding the never-ending push.
- Protect evenings, weekends and time off.
- Check in after hard moments, leading with empathy.
- Be honest about the limits of the system.

4. Grow

- Debrief: What happened? How do we make sense of it? What do we need now?
- Keep reviews about learning, not blame.
- Show how lessons changed something.
- Celebrate how people grew, not just the result.