



Keep Calm and ... Thrive

Developing resilience through practice, learning, and rest.

FROM SEPTEMBER 1940 TO MAY of 1941 inhabitants of London and other British port cities and industrial centers faced annihilation during an intense bombing campaign carried out by the German Luftwaffe. The 50,000 tons of bombs dropped on Britain killed 43,000 civilians and left a million more homeless. Hitler's intent was to create mass panic and force the British to surrender. Instead, the British people developed a strength that helped them survive the bombing blitz, overcome many other challenges, and ultimately prevail. The iconic phrase from that time, "Keep Calm and Carry On," embodies their spirit of resilience. To keep calm and carry on takes more than putting one's head down and simply surviving. Let's look at what we can learn from the British as well as other gritty people, such as athletes, to develop our own resilience.

Agency and attitude

Resilience is the ability to adapt, learn, grow, and thrive during times of adversity, challenge, and change. Every person and group of persons has the potential to be resilient. Activating that potential requires focus, effort, and practice. For instance, the British anticipated the bombing onslaught, had a leader in Winston Churchill who provided a shared purpose and vision, practiced air-raid precautions, and became firewatchers or members of firefighting brigades. Many also joined the home guard and were trained to defend against an enemy attack. By taking these actions, they experienced *agency*.

Agency is an attitude. It's having the sense that "I can act to make a change or impact an outcome." Agency is enhanced when a person

is given the right level of resources and training and is empowered to exercise it responsibly. Even when circumstances are not favorable, taking positive action increases agency.

An equally important component of agency is choosing how we respond to people and situations. Failure, mistakes, and adversity are inevitable. But remaining calm is a choice that helps us make better decisions. Resilient people and groups choose responses that will help them learn and grow. They strengthen their ability to do that by engaging regularly in some of the following habits (this is not a comprehensive list):

- exercise, yoga, walking, dancing, singing;
- meditation;
- visualization;
- a practice of gratitude;
- compassionate or generous actions;
- progressive muscle relaxation;
- forgiveness; and
- personal relationships.

The self-reinforcing brain

Research informs us that the above activities build resilience by: 1) increasing levels of good chemicals in our brains like dopamine and serotonin; 2) reducing levels of cortisol, a hormone which increases anxiety and is connected to the fight or flight response of the primitive brain; and 3) balancing our sympathetic (reacting) and parasympathetic (resting) nervous systems.

Marriage and family therapist Linda Graham, an expert on resilience, suggests that we make practicing these activities a regular habit. Her phrase "little and often" emphasizes that a few minutes spent each day doing some of the items above will lead to big gains in resilience.

For instance, practicing gratitude can consist



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of thinking each morning of three things for which we are grateful and repeating this at night. Engaging in gratitude helps temper our negativity bias (a focus on potential threats to our security) to which all humans are prone. Negativity bias may especially affect lawyers because we are trained to be problem spotters. Letting this bias color all our thoughts and interactions can lead to anxiety or depression. Awareness of this bias allows us to employ it appropriately, bringing balance and satisfaction to our lives.

Lawyers and athletes

Elite athletes have high resilience. Like lawyers, they have spent many hours learning and practicing the skills, tactics, and strategies of their sport. To be at their best, athletes:


- plan and practice responding to failures and adversity;
- use mistakes as learning

opportunities, not as occasions for blame;

- use meditation, visualization, and breathing to maintain a calm and positive attitude;
- support and encourage others, especially during adversity;
- seek to control what they can control;
- avoid focusing on what they can't control;
- employ a growth mindset as articulated by Stanford researcher Carol Dweck: Focus on the process, not the outcome;
- are willing to fail; and
- balance intense practice with periods of rest and time away.

By making these choices, athletes prepare themselves to be calm and present in pressure-filled moments. Athletes do another thing that lawyers should note: When injured, they take time to heal. Lawyers

have significantly higher rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and suicide than the general population. Even the most resilient among us is not immune when situations become overwhelming. When signs and symptoms that a lawyer is struggling appear, it's time to encourage that lawyer to get help. These difficulties will likely not be resolved by simply ignoring them and pushing through. Being our best—for ourselves and others—requires recognizing when to take time to heal.

If you'd like to learn more about developing resilience, LAP can help. Through our presentations, groups, individual counseling, peer support volunteers, and other services we help lawyers develop skills that lead to resilience, balance, and satisfaction. We provide those who are struggling with a place to begin healing. Give us a call at 312-726-6607 or email gethelp@illinoislap.org. 

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