Workers' Comp

Channeling Your Inner Resilience to Foster Return to Work and Productivity

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How peak recovery mindset can make the difference in return-to-work outcomes

No one is without misfortune and setbacks in life, but one could argue that some seem to face more challenges than others. Take the beloved Peanuts character, Charlie Brown. Charlie's life seems to be filled with constant defeat, yet he keeps forging ahead, and even celebrates the occasional "win."

This motivation to push forward in the face of adversity can be identified as resilience, the ability to adapt to life's misfortunes and setbacks. Resilience is an "inner strength" that helps us bounce back after stressful situations. It's how we face traumatic situations while continuing to function both mentally and physically. Resilient individuals are not void of anger, grief or pain. They simply find the strength from within, and from their social support, to forge ahead.

Being resilient can lead to a quicker recovery from difficult situations, including illness and injury. This doesn't mean we don't worry when the going gets tough, we just don't let these situations overwhelm us. Helping an injured employee build resilience is another element of the case management process. To accomplish this, we must have a deeper understanding of the injured employee's journey that encompasses not just the injury itself but social determinants that further impact recovery and return to work.

Mind-Body Connection

Our minds can have a positive or negative effect on our bodies. This linkage is referred to as the mind-body connection. How we think can affect how we feel and how we feel can affect our thinking. Moving from negative to positive thoughts helps the brain produce chemicals that can:

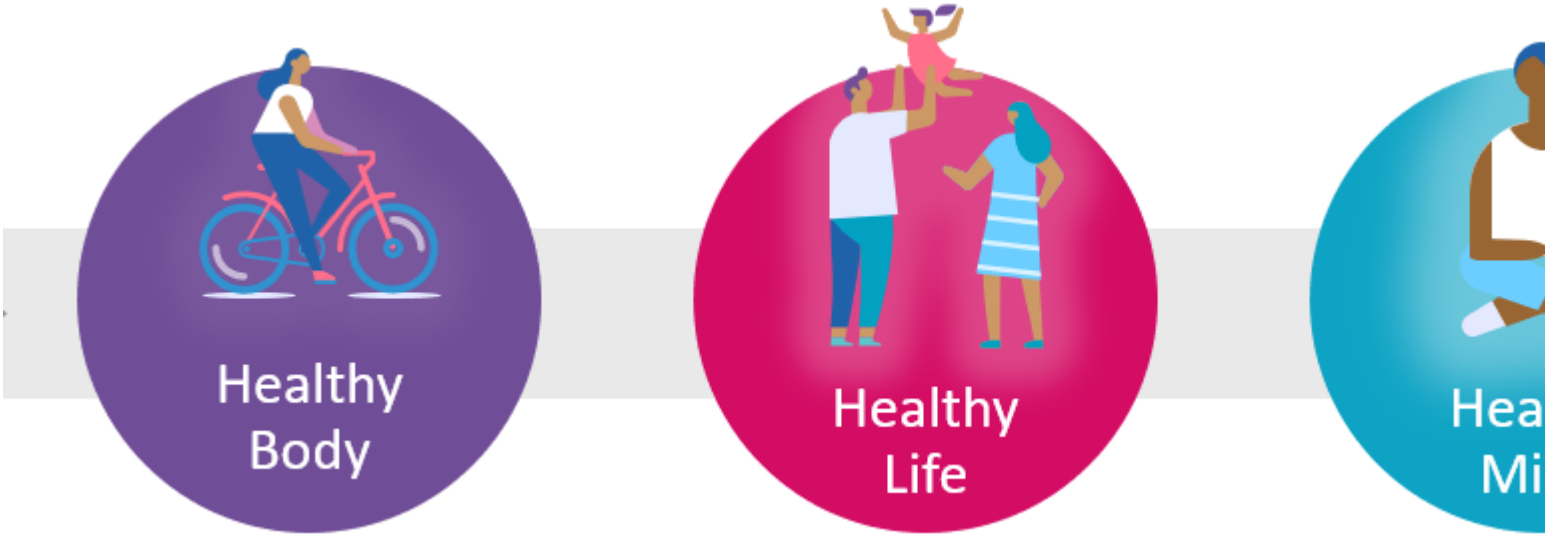
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce risk of heart disease
- Lower stress level and make us less anxious
- Help us avoid stomach problems
- Improve sleep
- Improve back pain
- Make us feel happier and more optimistic about life

A key component of resilience is optimism, that hopeful, positive outlook on the future and the world around us. Even if you tend to be a “glass half empty” person, you can practice “realistic optimism.” Realistic optimism doesn’t mean you expect the best and hope things go your way, instead, it allows you to see the “big picture” — both good and bad — and determine realistic expectations, what you can do to make things go well, and choose to focus on your strengths and positives of the situation.

Resilience is Personal

Resilience comes from our life passions and the purpose we derive from events, experiences, beliefs, and values. In an article published by the American Psychological Association, it is stated that resilience isn’t necessarily a personality trait that only some possess. The authors write, “On the contrary, resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that anyone can learn and develop. The ability to learn resilience is one reason research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary.” Most would likely agree the quest to build and strengthen one’s resilience is a lifelong process. There are a host of published articles on the topic, all with varying suggestions of how to make the journey. Here we will attempt to simplify resilience building into three overarching categories.

Resilience Building



- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Good sleep hygiene
- Hydration
- Alcohol and drug avoidance

- Stay connected with family
- Maintain a social network
- Focus on connections who are empathetic, trustworthy, compassionate and good for you
- Join groups with common goals – support, church or civic groups
- Give back to the community
- Lean on your support system

- Find the positive
- Believe in yourself
- Accept change
- Have an optimistic outlook
- Be thankful
- Practice mindfulness
- Explore your thoughts and feelings
- Set realistic goals
- Get help from a mental health professional if needed

In his book, *Embrace the Suck: The Navy SEAL Way to an Extraordinary Life*, combat veteran Brent Gleeson provides seven components in the mental model:

- Fully experience your pain and emotions
- Challenge your perspective
- Focus only on what is within your sphere of influence
- Surround yourself with the right influences
- Stay (or become) active and avoid negative coping mechanisms
- Know that bad things don't actually always come in threes
- Accept and forgive

Resilience and Injury Recovery

Injury or illness, whether occupational or other, affects everyone differently and brings about strong emotions, thoughts and uncertainty. Being resilient or able to "bounce back" helps us get through the situation and empowers us to grow along the way. Resilience isn't something we are born with, but we can learn and practice it. How often have we said in our industry the injured employee isn't "motivated" to return to work? That is typically considered a "red flag" and indication that the claim will not likely resolve in a timely manner. Maybe a better way to describe the situation is the injured employee simply doesn't possess the resilience needed to work through the biopsychosocial issues surrounding the injury. The injury can bring on stress and other psychological effects over a myriad of concerns including finances, employment outlook, fear of not achieving full recovery, or lack of trust in "the system," among others.

Athletes and Injured Workers – More Alike Than You'd Think

You may not realize it, but injured employees are not unlike injured athletes. They often have access to the same physicians and share similar concerns around their ability to rebound from an injury. The Athlete Crisis Model shows us how a person's mental state has a significant effect on our motivation and physical wellbeing, including injury recovery. Specifically, this theory speaks to the fact that athletes with low levels of resilience are at a higher risk of slow recovery, re-injury, performance slumps and even mental health issues.

As with athletes, for injured employees to achieve the best possible outcome or "peak recovery" we must attend to both physical and psychosocial effects of the injury. Case managers can promote this by:

- Providing coaching and education around the injury, treatment and recovery
- Helping injured employees understand that their feelings are normal reactions to the injury
- Supporting injured employees as they work through the process
- Offering tools and techniques to help build a resilient mindset

Encouraging injured employees to visualize optimal results of recovery — becoming active and strong, engaging in enjoyable activities — can lead to a more optimistic view of rehabilitation and the prescribed treatment plan, which can lead to better outcomes. The case manager's goal is to assist the injured employee is achieving the "peak recovery mindset." Without intervention and lacking resilience, the injured employee could experience delayed recovery, both physically and mentally.

Managing the Journey to Recovery

We are all faced with various types of adversity throughout life, perhaps even physical injury. It is important to learn from the journey and manage negative thoughts and emotions to become more resilient and help others as they encounter the challenges of life.

Additional Resources:

- https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2020/06/30/7-secrets-you-need-to-know-for-building-resilience/?sh=6efb0d4b7f84
- https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-awesome-career/201907/mentoring-the-secret-building-resilience
- https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience
- https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/ramp-up-your-resilience



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