



THRIVE

# Resilience : DON'T WAIT FOR IT TO FEEL RIGHT

By Dr. Jessica Harmon

**D**uring the O2X workshop, we talk at length about what it means to be resilient. It takes real mental work and energy to transcend hardship. Resiliency is so much more than an abstract concept. Increasing your resiliency means taking a hard look at yourself, how you're living your life. It will likely also require you to change up your normal routine, which can be uncomfortable and awkward.

Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, explains that habit behaviors are traced to a part of the brain called the basal ganglia – associated with emotions, patterns, and memories. Decisions, on the other hand, are made in the prefrontal cortex, a completely different area. When a behavior becomes habit, we stop using our decision-making skills and instead function on auto-pilot.

Have you ever noticed how your self-discipline to make a good decision often fails later in the day or when you're simply tired or stressed out? The plan to eat healthy, go to the gym after work or even be calm and not irritable with your family in the evening – it often all goes out the window when you've been making decisions

all day or you're stressed or tired. Think about it. If you don't have a good plan in place, when your mental energy is depleted, you are more likely to fall back on what is familiar and easy. We are all vulnerable to shifting habits during times of change, stress or hardship. This can facilitate incredible growth, but can also be difficult as we may choose the easy path leading to bad habits.

Therefore, breaking a bad habit and building a new habit not only requires us to make active decisions, but it also may feel unnatural or even just plain wrong. Your brain will resist the change in favor of what it has been programmed to do. The solution? Embrace the uncomfortable. Acknowledge that it will take a while for your new regimen to feel right or good or natural. Keep chugging along. It will happen.

### The Habit of Mindfulness

Are you interested in trying a new routine to increase concentration, decrease mental stress and train your brain to focus on the things you want it to? Do you ever feel like you cannot shut your brain off when you lay down to go to sleep? Have you ever had someone tell you details but you realize after you actually don't remember what you were told? Mindfulness training teaches your brain to refocus and redirect your attention to whatever you want or need to. When practiced regularly, this can be a great tool to decrease stress. The goal of these exercises is to become more intentional about what you're focusing on without being distracted by other things. Your brain will also start learning to process

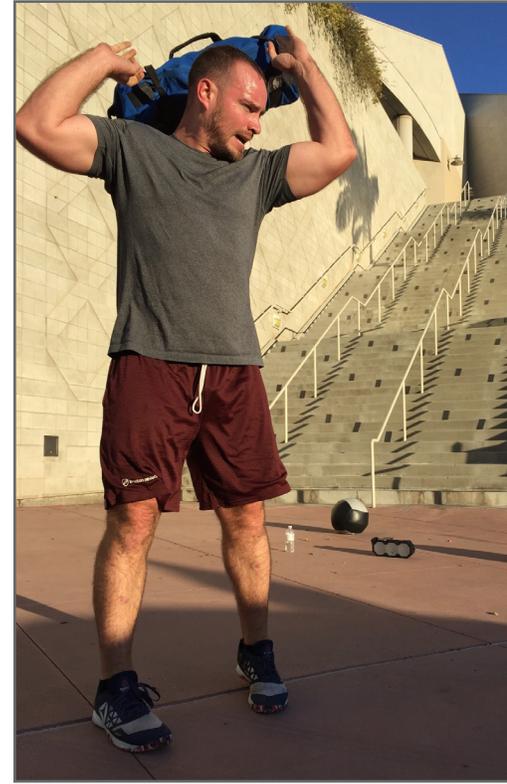
information rather than just notice and dump it out. By being present in the moment you (consciously at first) become more attentive to what is right in front of you and eventually decide what is important and what is not. You will not lose the ability to maintain situational awareness by doing this. In fact, it will have the opposite effect. You should start to notice that you are becoming more situationally aware, and feel calmer and more focused.

### Exercise 1: Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to fully connect your mind to your environment. Details are easily missed when we get busy, rushed, or stressed and this is a great tool to maintain focus in hectic environments.

Pick something in your immediate environment and focus on it for a minute or two. This could be a picture, sounds, a bird, an insect, your child, or whatever you want. Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at or listening to. But, *really* notice it. Look or listen as if you are seeing/hearing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect of this object or thing. Take in every sound. You may notice your mind starts to wander as you're building this skill, but you should start to notice that it gets easier to focus and redirect your thinking as you continue to practice. This is a great time to also integrate breathing exercises, which puts all of these skills together.

You can learn more about mindfulness and find new techniques to try in the THRIVE section of the O2X Portal.



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"Mindfulness is like the gym for your brain."

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**Exercise 2:**

Take a regular routine that you find yourself “just doing” without really noticing your actions. For example, when cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than a routine job or chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions. Pay attention to the motion of sweeping the floor, notice the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, observe the formation of dirt on your vehicle and see if you can create a more efficient way of removing it. Don't rush through thinking about the finish line, be aware of every step of the process and attempt to only think about the detail immediately in front of you, each step along the way. Take the activity beyond a routine by merging with it physically and mentally. In doing so, you are teaching your brain to be present in the moment and focus on what you want to.

Eventually your brain will start doing this without having to think about it. 🏔️



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Dr. Harmon has multiple combat deployments and has spent over 24 months in combat environments providing psychological support, including traumatic event management to individuals and teams in both Afghanistan and Iraq. She works with service members and their families to provide preventative stress management training as well as teaching individuals how to develop and maintain resiliency and growth in the after math of trauma and loss.

