

## The BIG 5: surprising answers to questions you should be asking about stress and resilience

I was recently facilitating a resilience workshop with neurosurgery registrars, literally brain surgeons. One of the delegates noted that the group was very intelligent and did these principles apply to them (we were talking about sleep



deprivation.) I pointed out that whilst they were indeed super-smart, they were not super-men/women. From my experience, I have found that some of the most intelligent and driven people are the ones most likely to burnout, in-part due to erroneous beliefs/approaches regarding stress and resilience. So, what are these “Big 5” questions that trip us up in our quest for resilience? They are:

1. Do I believe that stress is primarily harmful to my health? (Must I avoid it at all costs?)
2. Do difficult experiences trigger personal growth or regression?
3. Do I have abundant vitality? (If not, is chronic fatigue the price I should pay to get ahead?)
4. Do I thrive in all aspects of my life (i.e. mental, physical, socio-emotional, and spiritual)?
5. Do I have a clear, sustainable action plan that will facilitate thriving?

If you answered an emphatic “Yes!” to questions 3, 4 and 5 and “No” to question 1, stop reading this article and go share your wisdom with others.

If you answered “Yes” to question 1 and/or “No” to either questions 3, 4 and 5, then this resilience article series could be your GPS that guides you out of survival mode and back onto the liberating path towards a thriving, resilient life. In this series I will share with you my science-based insights from my Ph.D. and experiences in the field of resilience over the last 20 years.

But first, let us delve a little deeper into the logic of why I asked you each of the Big 5 questions.....

### Question 1: Do I believe that stress is primarily harmful, to my health? Must I avoid it at all costs?

Over the years, people have increasingly become more negative about stress, even when only experiencing moderate levels. In 1998 researchers asked 30,000 USA adults how much stress they had experienced in the past year. They were also asked: “Do you believe stress is harmful to your health?” [Eight years later, researchers](#) scoured public records to find out who among the 30,000 participants had died. High levels of stress increased the risk of dying by 43%.

But the increased risk applied only to people who believed that stress was harming their health. *People who reported high levels of stress but who did not view the stressors as harmful were not more likely to die. [In fact, they had the lowest risk of death](#) of anyone in the study, even lower than those who reported experiencing very little stress!!*

[People](#) who believe that stress can be helpful are more likely to say that they cope with stress proactively by accepting the reality of the situation, seeking information, creating an action plan, initiating steps to overcome or alter the stressor and make the best of the situation. All are key ingredients for a more resilient life. The lenses through which we see the world have a dramatic impact on the actions we take. The theme of this article series will be to candidly review these lenses to ensure we see the situations for what they truly are. This new perspective, that acknowledges both the positive and negative fosters realism and ultimately a more pragmatic, robust approach to life's challenges.

### **Question 2: Do difficult experiences trigger personal growth or regression?**

Whilst most of us would prefer to live a fairy tale existence, we know that life tends to be a mixture of both ups and downs. [Mark Seery, Associate Professor at Buffalo University](#) ran a nationally representative study of 2000 Americans over 4 years. As part of the study, researchers asked participants if they had ever experienced 37 different negative life events, such as serious illness, death of friend or loved one, divorce etc. 8% reported never experiencing any of these negative life events, and the max number was 31 out of 37!! Then he looked to see if the prevalence of negative life events would predict their wellbeing over the 4-year period. He found an inverted U-shape curve, with those in the middle the best off. People on both extremes were more depressed, experienced more health problems and were less satisfied with their lives. *Ironically, the absence of stress is not always a blessing, as you do not get to build your resilience capability muscle.* We need to embrace these negative past experiences as [growth opportunities](#) that we can tap into to overcome future challenges.

### **Question 3: Do I have abundant vitality? (If not, is chronic fatigue the price I should pay to get ahead?)**

*When Tom Rath, author of Fully Charged, surveyed 10 000 people he found only 11% reported having a great deal of energy.* How can we embrace change and become the best versions of ourselves if we don't have enough gas in the tank to begin with?

Beyond self-actualisation, a lack of sleep is linked to an incredibly wide range of ailments, from [heart disease and Type 2 diabetes](#) to [obesity](#), [depression](#), [poor cognitive function](#), and even [Alzheimer's disease](#).

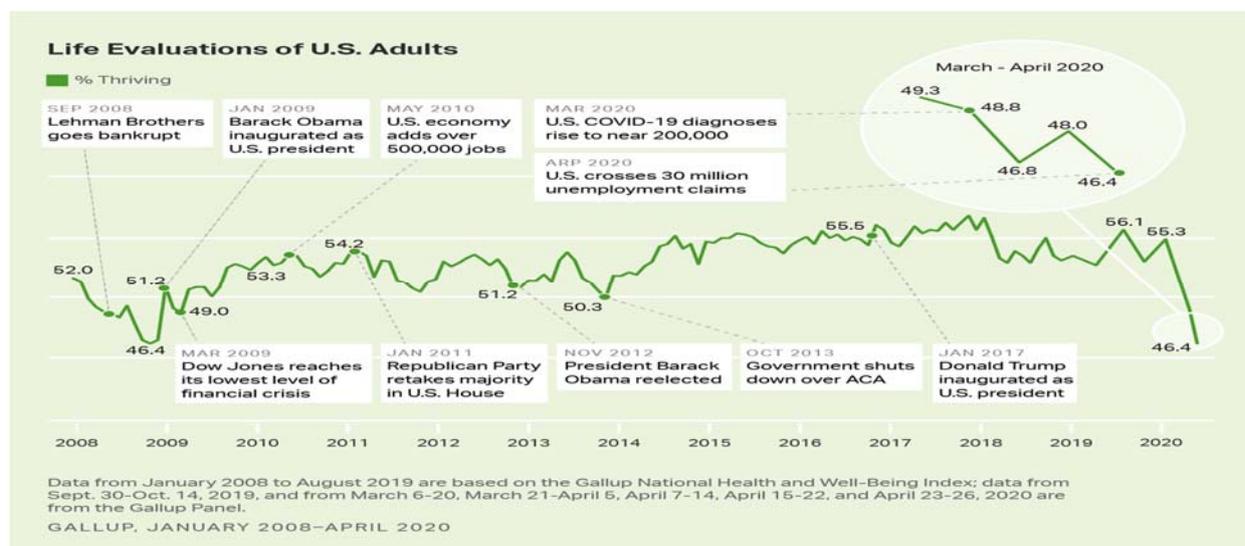
[Prof Morten Hansen](#), a management professor at University of California, Berkeley recently completed a five-year study, 5000-person study that showed working more is not necessarily a

driver of better performance. He found that that individuals *who do less* (i.e. focus on a few key priorities) and *then obsess* (i.e. make great efforts within those chosen areas of focus) will perform better at work than those who do not.

In my work in this field, I often find that people start with the physical fitness sphere of my model, despite the fact that [my model](#) is not a pyramid in design, but circular inferring equal importance with no preferred starting point. It has occurred to me that this could either be because people are more comfortable discussing this dimension in follow-up group sessions, and/or it's the intuitive realization by delegates that without the necessary energy it's impossible to take on the challenges of change.

#### Question 4: Do I thrive in all aspects of my life (mental, physical, socio-emotional, and spiritual)?

[In 2008](#), the first full year of the Great Recession, the thriving percentage fell from 52.0% in January to its low of 46.4% ten months later, a 5.6 percentage point decline. *The current decline in 2020, occurring over about the same amount of time, is nearly double this amount, erasing 11 years of steady (albeit uneven) improvement in how Americans evaluate their lives.*



In an earlier [Gallup](#) study researchers quantified the increased disease risk burden when people aren't thriving in their 5 wellbeing domains (i.e. Career, Social, Financial, Physical and Community). They concluded that individuals who were not thriving in any of the five dimensions, had a 35% likelihood of incurring increased disease burden in the previous year compared to 11% for those who were thriving in all five well-being dimensions. *Astoundingly, that is more than 3 times the difference between thrivers and strugglers!!*

Clearly, more so than ever, we need to focus on greater thriving across ALL our wellbeing domains if we value our health. This may however seem unrealistic as we are already stressed out, but if we live an integrated not compartmentalised existence this becomes attainable. If

you are still sceptical, then just answer this one question: “Can I really afford NOT to invest in all 4 key wellbeing areas over the long-term (mental, physical, spiritual and socio-emotional areas of my life)?”

#### Question 5: Do I have a clear, sustainable action plan that will facilitate thriving?

One of the defining features of highly successful people is their focus. They appreciate the value of their time and energy, and they invest them wisely. This requires a careful choreography of deliberate action (goal setting), repeated over time (habits) that move them in the right direction (purpose). [See my Trifecta article if you want a practical toolkit to make this a reality.](#)

In 2002, Prof. Locke and Latham (the pre-eminent researchers in this field) wrote [an article in \*American Psychologist\*](#) summarizing their 35 years of research. Among their counter-intuitive findings they identified that:

- High goals generate greater effort than low goals, and the highest or most difficult goals produce the greatest levels of effort and performance. (The large decline in thriving levels in 2020 as result of COVID-19 fits well into the high goal characteristics.)
- Setting specific, difficult goals consistently leads to higher performance than just urging people to do their best.
- Tight deadlines lead to a more rapid work pace than loose deadlines.
- When goals are set by the person having to deliver on them, they tend to set harder goals, especially if they are self-confident.

Goals starve your distractions and feed your focus. Despite how central focus is to success, it is fascinating how many of us adopt a Jekyll and Hyde approach to life. Typically, people are very goal-orientated when it comes to work but blissfully ignore these principles when it comes to their personal lives. So, what's your plan? Is it working? Does it integrate the 4 key resilience components (mental, physical, spiritual, and socio-emotional) of your life?

In closing, the first step in the change process is awareness. These questions hopefully have provided a new lens through which to view stress, and an urgency to act. The next step is to explore your options, based on your unique context, which we will start next week.

