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sustaining
WORK

thriving, or just surviving?

An analogy that is often used to describe resilience is keeping your head above water. What happens when the flood rises? Presumably, resilience then means being able to hold your breath longer. This isn't resilience, this is just surviving. What resilience is really about is knowing there's no water to keep your head above.



To be able to see what this means, the first step is to make a clear distinction between pressure and stress. Pressure is simply a demand to perform, and when there's high demand there's also high arousal to meet the demand. Adrenaline levels rise and the body is provoked into 'fight or flight' mode, but this is not stress. Adrenaline is not a 'stress hormone', but rather a hormone doing exactly what it is designed to do – facilitate action. At the same time there is emotional arousal, which is also entirely appropriate. However, pressure comes and goes, and the important question is what happens when the pressure recedes?

Ideally, arousal then returns to resting levels and there is a period of recovery. Watch your pet cat, woken up at the last minute by your silent approach: it jumps up, hair standing on end, ready to fight or flee. The next second it recognises you, its fur flattens and it relaxes again. The outer calm you see is a reflection of inner calm: the adrenaline that accompanies

fight or flight is quickly metabolised. What your cat doesn't do is to sit around afterwards thinking 'That might have been the dog next door! What if there'd been another three dogs with it! What if there's one round the corner now!' If it did think like this its hair would continue to stand on end.

Now relate that to your own experience the last time something upset you. How often, and for how long afterwards, did you go on and on thinking about it? Every time you do this you provoke fight or flight: levels of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol increase, and blood pressure rises. Nothing is actually happening, all you're reacting to is a thought in your head. This isn't reflecting on a rational action plan, this is ruminating endlessly on imagined 'what ifs' and 'if-onlys'. As Mark Twain said, 'some of the worst things in my life never happened', and ruminating about emotional upset is the most appropriate way of defining stress.

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