

# Healthcare Workers: In Times of Great Stress, Resilience Fundamentals Can Save Us

By: Wayne M. Sotile, PhD and Gary R. Simonds, MD, MHCDS

Being on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic is incredibly tough on healthcare workers and your families. Yet you *must* stay at the top of your game so you can keep going. The key is to think of yourself as an elite athlete, or perhaps a special forces military operator.

It takes rigorous training to endure in extreme circumstances. That means practicing fundamental resilience-building tactics daily until they are habits. Only then will you be able to keep your focus on what you're doing, without letting stress derail you. When the heat is on, your training will kick in.

We have spent much of our careers figuring out what those habits are. We have studied high-performance healthcare professionals and isolated the tactics they use to cope with stress and build up their resilience.

We have long emphasized owning your own well-being and focusing on the 10 percent you *can* control rather than the 90 percent you *can't*. In these incredibly tough times, that's even more important. And it's not just about surviving what you're going through right now—it's about building the resilience to navigate the long journey ahead.

Consider that studies done on survivors of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing six months later found that 45 percent of participants were suffering from a post-disaster psychiatric disorder and 34.3 percent had PTSD.<sup>1</sup>

Our major resilience challenges do not come during a crisis; they unfold in the wake of the trauma. But you don't have to suffer through PTSD symptoms as part of the aftermath. Evidence-based guidelines for assuring "post-traumatic growth" can help. Especially when you make these habits part of who you are.

The bottom line? You need a resilience tool kit to help you manage your energy and protect your well-being. These are a few of the fundamentals:

**Regularly add to your personal emotional and relationship energy reserves.** Store up positive experiences like playing with your child, going on a backyard picnic date with your partner, or watching a funny movie on your day off. That way, the "withdrawals" that come with the constant or emergent stress you are facing won't "break" your coping abilities.

**Recognize and harvest daily uplifts.** Even in the most dismal of circumstances you can find "uplifts"—happy, reaffirming, exhilarating, peace-restoring events—at work. Notice, savor, and celebrate them. Examples might be when your patient turns a corner, when an anonymous donor buys lunch or dinner for the staff, or when a shipment of home-sewn masks arrives just in time.

Daily uplifts are always there even when everything seems bleak. The more you look for them, the easier they will be to spot.

**Control your physiological stress reactions, learning to execute "steady state" activation.** It's important to learn that fine art of managing "fire fights" of life-and-death crisis by remaining active enough to be at the top of our game but "calm" enough to be able to sustain clear thinking and endurance. This is a teachable and learnable skillset.

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<sup>1</sup> North, C. S., Nixon, S. J., & Shariat, S. (1999). Psychiatric Disorders Among Survivors of the Oklahoma City Bombing. *JAMA Network*, 282(8), 755–762. doi: 10.1001/jama.282.8.755. Retrieved [here](#) on April 13, 2020.

**Practice attitudes that foster resilience.** A positive attitude can make a difference in how you feel. Incorporate these resilience boosters into your own day-to-day medical experience:

- Realistic optimism: This is really hard. But we are going to get through this.
- Wonderment (a.k.a. learning to see the familiar in unfamiliar ways): Healthy babies are being born even in this pandemic. How miraculous that life finds a way.
- Meaning: I am here to help others, and my work really does matter.

**Learn to counter stress-generating thought patterns.** You may find yourself imagining worst-case scenarios or indulging in catastrophic thoughts, exaggerating, and shaming or blaming yourself or others. This is normal, but such thought patterns can spiral. Check in with yourself frequently. When you catch yourself thinking damaging thoughts, gently stop yourself and choose a healthier thought instead.

**Take good care of your physical health.** Do everything you can to keep your body strong. Try to eat healthfully, focusing on plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Get as much sleep as possible. Hydrate with water. Yes, you're tired but try to get in a walk on your day off. Our physical and mental health are interconnected—and keeping your immune system strong is more important than ever these days.

**Regularly debrief the effects of daily “battle.”** Instead of putting on a tough face and soldiering on, be open about how you are affected by the painful experiences you're having every day. Find a trusted colleague, friend, or family member to help you process the feelings of shock, despair, outrage, anger, or guilt that you feel.

**Develop and share a vision for the future.** With close colleagues, teammates, or loved ones, articulate your vision of a desired future. If you can remember that good things are in store for you personally and professionally, it will be easier to persevere through the difficult times. We all need to remember that the pandemic will not last forever.

**Remind yourself that you have coped with difficult times, losses, and setbacks before.** Think of how you handled and ultimately made it through previous challenges. Tell yourself that you will make it through this time as well. This practice stirs your awareness of self-efficacy—task-specific self-confidence—for coping with even novel circumstances.

**Find (and embrace) a philosophy that helps you cope for the long haul.** We all need to find a way to put what's happening in perspective, one that allows us to persevere in the face of ever-worsening news. One example might be: “There are no perfect people/families/organizations, but we are all learning as we deal with this.”

**Appeal to a higher ideology that offers hope.** If you believe in a nurturing Higher Power, you really need to lean on that belief system right now. Make time for prayer or meditation. If not, then put your full faith behind your organization, team, or human resilience and innovativeness in general. Or reaffirm your commitment to enduring for the sake of something or someone other than yourself, such as your partner and children, your parents, or your friends.

This pandemic is revealing our industry's desperate need for resilience training. It is time to start treating yourself like the high performer you already are. If you give your body and spirit what they need now, you will grow from this experience and emerge stronger than ever.

## About the Authors:

**Gary R. Simonds, MD, MHCDS**, and **Wayne M. Sotile, PhD**, are coauthors of *Thriving in Healthcare: A Positive Approach to Reclaim Balance and Avoid Burnout in Your Busy Life* (Huron|Studer Group Publishing, 2019, ISBN: 978-1-62218-108-7, \$32.00), *The Thriving Physician: How to Avoid Burnout by Choosing Resilience Throughout Your Medical Career* (Huron|Studer Group Publishing, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-62218-101-8, \$32.00), and *Building Resilience in Neurosurgical Residents* (B Wright Publishing, 2015, ISBN: 978-0-69244-951-6, \$24.95).

Dr. Simonds is a highly experienced clinical and academic neurosurgeon. He trained at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and completed a medical research fellowship at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. He also holds a master's degree in health care delivery science from Dartmouth College. He is a professor at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, the Virginia Tech School of Neuroscience, and the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Known for his compassion and broad neurosurgical expertise, Dr. Simonds has personally performed over 13,500 operations, adult and pediatric. His interests have included socioeconomic issues affecting patient care, medical ethics, education of all levels of learners, and the promotion of wellness in medical practitioners and trainees. He recently retired from his position as chief of neurosurgery and residency program director at Carilion Clinic-Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine.

Dr. Sotile is the founder of the Sotile Center for Resilience and the Center for Physician Resilience, in Davidson, North Carolina. Of the 45,000 people they have coached or counseled, more than 70 percent have worked in healthcare, including 12,000 physicians. Dr. Sotile is an international thought leader on resilience and work/life balance for busy professionals. He has published widely in the peer-reviewed medical literature and has authored nine books. His work is featured frequently in the national print and television media, and he has appeared on *Good Morning America*, *CBS This Morning*, *Dateline NBC*, and other broadcast programs.

As one of the most sought-after keynote speakers today, Dr. Sotile has delivered more than 9,000 invited addresses and workshops to audiences of high-performing professionals across disciplines. He consults nationally with organizations interested in deepening workforce resilience and leadership passion and effectiveness.

Dr. Sotile earned a BS degree in psychology from Louisiana State University and a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of South Carolina. He completed his clinical training in medical psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center.

## About the Books:

*Thriving in Healthcare: A Positive Approach to Reclaim Balance and Avoid Burnout in Your Busy Life* (Huron|Studer Group Publishing, 2019, ISBN: 978-1-62218-108-7, \$32.00) is available from major online booksellers and the [Huron|Studer Group website](#).

*The Thriving Physician: How to Avoid Burnout by Choosing Resilience Throughout Your Medical Career* (Huron|Studer Group Publishing, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-62218-101-8, \$32.00) is available from major online booksellers and the [Huron|Studer Group website](#).

