

PSYCHOLOGIES
MAGAZINE

“One of the best
books I’ve ever
read on practical
resilience.”

-Miriam Akhtar, positive
psychologist and author of *What
is Post-Traumatic Growth?*

REAL STRENGTH

Build your resilience and
bounce back from *anything*



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FOREWORD

by Suzy Greaves, Editor, *Psychologies*

Divorce, debt, redundancy, loss of loved ones. We wouldn't be human if we didn't struggle in the face of such ordeals. But what would it be like if we could learn the skills of not only surviving such challenges, but learning and growing because of them?

At *Psychologies*, we believe that real strength is not about powering through a crisis with a stiff upper lip. It's about using life's challenges to reset your course, for you to be able to admit vulnerability, tell the truth about how you feel and then find a way to move forward again.

Yes, when you are first faced with huge changes it is a massive shock to the system, and you can feel lost, scared, sad and confused. But real strength is about feeling all of these emotions and then finding a way to centre yourself again and respond from a place of hope and optimism versus fear. It's not about inane optimism either. You are allowed to prepare for the worst as well as hope for the best. Real strength is about finding a sense of meaning in the adversity. It can be an opportunity to look at how you are spending your time and your energy and committing to a life that is built on your values.

At *Psychologies*, we believe that each and every one of us has an innate wisdom to help choose the right path. Right now, you may not know what that path may be, but by picking up this book you have taken the first step to finding a way through the challenges you may be currently facing and building the resilience you need to create the life you want.

And we are right by your side.

Good luck!

Suzy Greaves, Editor, *Psychologies*

INTRODUCTION

There are obviously a million possible reasons why you picked up this book, but we would hazard a guess that a big part of it is because, right now, you could do with some real strength. We'd like to point out that that alone – the fact you are on the hunt for things to help yourself in your current situation – indicates you are already stronger and more resilient than you think. Being able to seek support is an important part of building strength.

'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade' or so the saying goes. And this is possibly what this book is about in a nutshell. No one can escape the lemons, after all. There are not many things we can guarantee in life but the fact we will all, at some point, come across adversity is one of them. Adversity, trauma, pain, struggles – call it what you will – upheaval happens in our lives whether we like it or not and, chances are, it's happening to you right now.

This could be subtle upheaval such as rows with loved ones and disappointments, or more serious trauma such as bereavement, getting divorced and illness. It doesn't have to be an 'event' at all; you could just feel that you are in a rut. We are all thrown a curveball once in a while but it's how we react and deal with those curveballs that makes us stronger. And crucially, how we grow from them. That's what we believe real strength is at *Psychologies* magazine – not just surviving hard times, but thriving because, and in spite of them – and this is what this book aims to help you to do.

But just as the traumas we will all experience in our lives will differ hugely, so will our perceptions of those experiences. The same can be said of what we constitute as real strength all we can say,

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is that ‘real’ is the crucial word here; because it’s about what feels real and authentic to you, what makes *you* feel strong.

That’s probably the most important ethos here at *Psychologies* magazine: you are an individual and what helps and inspires you when you hit a rough patch won’t necessarily help the next person. That’s why we’d like you to see *Real Strength* as a toolkit for unlocking and building upon *your* inner resilience; your ability, not just to bounce back from adversity, but to use it as a platform to bounce even higher. And this is perfectly within your reach. It’s likely that it doesn’t feel like that right now, but trust us, it is.

In fact, we’re here not only to help you believe that, but to show you how it’s done. Using the latest research and advice from experts in fields of wellbeing and resilience, *Real Strength* aims to help you define your own brand of resilience and to develop the skills to tap into it. We sincerely believe that if you can do that, there is greater joy and contentment waiting for you around the corner and it’s very probable you will come to see this hardship you’re going through as the greatest gift you were ever given.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We’ve divided this book into three parts:

1. What Does Real Strength Mean to You?
2. What’s Stopping You from Bouncing Back?
3. How Can You Build Real Strength?

In Part 1, you’ll gain an overview of the interpretations – current and not so current – of real strength in our culture. We’ll invite you to look at all the different ways in which we, at *Psychologies*, define it, and encourage you to decide which parts of the list chime most with you in order to curate your own definition. Or at least to decide which facets of real strength you’d like to work on the most.

In Part 2, we'll help you to understand what obstacles you might be coming up against that are stopping you from feeling and being stronger. We'll look at whether certain people are naturally more resilient than others – what skills and qualities they have that you could learn and how to learn them. Also, there's a section on 'strength robbers' – common pitfalls we fall into that chip away at our ability to be resilient.

In Part 3, we give you real techniques and actual therapies that professionals use that will help you to build strength and resilience in the most empowering and lasting way possible. We aim for these practical steps to be things you can take away with you for the rest of your life. We don't want to keep you waiting until the final part for practical help though, so throughout the book you'll find tips that you can try out in order to start feeling better and stronger right now.

THE EXPERTS INTERVIEWED FOR REAL STRENGTH

Liggy Webb, Consultant in Behavioural Skills

Liggy Webb is a leading author, presenter and thought leader on resilience. She has researched and developed a range of techniques and practical approaches to support both individuals and organizations to cope more effectively and successfully with the demands and challenges of life.

Some of the organizations she has worked with include the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, BBC, NHS, Macmillan Cancer Support, Sainsbury's, Ralph Lauren and Walt Disney.

Liggy is also the founding director of The Learning Architect, an international consortium of behavioural skills specialists.

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She is recognized as a thought leader on resilience and is regularly asked to be a keynote speaker across private and public sectors.

Liggy's latest book *Resilience: How To Cope When Everything Around You Keeps Changing* is a practical and accessible guide for coping with change and offers advice on how to how to bounce back from challenging situations.

Dr Michael Sinclair, Consultant Counselling Psychologist

Dr Michael Sinclair is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Chartered Scientist registered with the Science Council. He works with individuals, couples and families who are experiencing a wide range of psychological problems, such as depression and anxiety. He also provides cutting-edge stress management training to corporate employees as well as mindfulness workshops for the public.

He is one of the founders and the Clinical Director of City Psychology Group in London. He is the consultant to several corporate occupational health departments advising on employees' mental health and wellbeing. He also provides psychological consultancy and performance coaching to senior managers working in law and finance, as well as training and supervision to other health practitioners and psychologists.

He has worked as a psychologist within schools, specialist mental health clinics and GP's surgeries and The Royal Free Hospital in London. He is particularly skilled in delivering cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), as well as being highly experienced in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and other mindfulness-based approaches for behavioural change.

He has published a range of self-help books, including: *Fear and Self-Loathing in the City: A Guide To Keeping Sane In The*

Square Mile, The Little CBT Workbook: A Step By Step Guide To Gaining Control Of Your Life, Mindfulness for Busy People: Turning Frantic and Frazzled into Calm and Composed and Working with Mindfulness: Keeping Calm and Focussed to Get the Job Done.

His latest book is *The Little ACT Workbook, An Introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: A Mindfulness-Based Guide for Leading a Full and Meaningful Life.*

1 WHAT DOES REAL STRENGTH MEAN TO YOU?

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS *REAL* STRENGTH?

What comes to mind when you think of the word ‘strength’? Not the sort of strength that means you can lift weights at the gym of course, but mental and emotional strength (although you could argue that you need a degree of the latter, to do the former). You often hear people say, ‘she’s such a strong person’ or ‘he’ll be alright, he’s strong’, but what do they mean? Chances are, everybody will mean something slightly different, and the sort of person your friend or your mum or your colleague thinks of as strong may not be the sort of person you think of.

Try it now: if you were to describe a strong person, or identify someone you already know who you think of as mentally strong, who would you choose? What qualities and traits do they possess? Perhaps you see a strong person as stoic; someone who rarely complains and seems to be able to withstand more pain and adversity than others; or perhaps it is someone who possesses military-style toughness – who seems fearless and enjoys pushing themselves to the limit. Write down the name of the person or people if you like, and a list of what makes them strong in your opinion.

This is a useful exercise for defining your notions of real strength as they are right now, but the purpose of this chapter is to hold up those current notions and examine them; if necessary, to challenge them. Because while stoicism, toughness and so on definitely have their value, we believe that *real* strength is a lot more subtle, complex and wide-reaching than that. It’s certainly not as simple as the opposite of weakness. In fact, it’s probably not what you think it is at all. When you discover what real strength is really about, we bet you’ll realize you’re already much stronger than you think.

Before we begin to help you tap into the reserves of strength you already have, and help you build more, let’s explore definitions of real strength – current and more outdated. It’s important to

point out that this isn't THE definitive list because, as we've said, real strength is open to interpretation. Instead, see it more as an exploration of real strength. The idea, then, is that you can use this list as inspiration. You can decide which versions of strength mean the most to you. Crucially, you can decide which facets of real strength you could benefit most from working on in order to help you not just survive this bump in the road, but to come out thriving. Not just to bounce back, but to bounce higher. Because we all have reserves of strength, it's just knowing how to access them. Once you can do that, you really can triumph over adversity and find deeper joy and satisfaction in your life.

DEFINING REAL STRENGTH

1. Real strength is about resilience

When you think of the word 'strong', chances are certain synonyms come to mind: tough, robust, resilient, determined ... Of all these, resilient is probably the closest to what we mean when we talk about *real* strength. You could go so far as to say that the two words are interchangeable.

Still, there are so many ways to define strength and resilience. If we look up 'strength' in the *Oxford Dictionary*, there are no less than 18 definitions. These include:

1. Capacity for moral effort or endurance.
2. Power to sustain force without breaking or yielding.
3. Physical power.

For 'resilience' alone, there are three:

1. The action or an act of rebounding or springing back.
2. Elasticity.
3. The ability to recover readily from, or resist being affected by, a setback, an illness.

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If we were to take all these descriptions and turn them into a three-word description, we could say that resilience/real strength is ‘thriving despite adversity’. That’s about it in a nutshell. But let’s delve deeper ...

The word resilience¹ first came into use in the 1970s. Emmy Werner was one of the first scientists to use the word resilience to describe a group of children from Kauai, Hawaii, who despite growing up in poverty with alcoholic and mentally-ill parents, still thrived as adults (whereas another group exhibited destructive behaviours). Resilience soon became used as a term in psychology, and many years later, in 2007, was defined as: ‘The capacity to withstand traumatic situations and the ability to use trauma as the start of something new.’

Then, at the beginning of the 21st century, the business world picked up on the concept of resilience and came up with something called Resilience Engineering: ‘the ability to reinvent business models and strategies as, and if, circumstances change’.

Now, you may wonder what on earth business definitions of resilience have to do with the human sort and, more importantly, real strength, but we think it’s rather a lot. In fact, if we analyse what Resilience Engineering is all about it helps us reach a much more sophisticated understanding of what we mean when we talk about *real* strength. After all, if they can engineer resilience for businesses, then surely we can do it for ourselves. The Resilience Engineering website (www.resilience-engineering-association.org) defines a resilient individual (or system) as one that can ‘sustain required operations under both expected and unexpected conditions’ as well as being able to ‘do what’s required under a variety of conditions, rather than just the ability to recover from threats and stresses’.

¹ To describe human beings at least, as opposed to types of timber, which is the only way the word was used for a long time!