



We all fail some of the hurdles work throws at us, so being able to bounce back is an essential skill – and **Liz Hoggard** discovers it can be learned

# HOW HIGH IS YOUR RQ?

\*RESILIENCE QUOTIENT

A HOT flush of shame washes over me. I fight back the tears, as I try to explain I have too much work to do. The boss looks doubtful. According to business psychologist Jane Clarke, I have made three classic mistakes. I've taken things personally ("Why is it only me this happens to?"). I've turned a minor setback into a catastrophe. And I've walked away with low self-esteem.

Instead, I need to think: "What am I going to do to fix this?" I should "reframe" my language more positively, and deliver feedback in an authentic but constructive way.

Resilience – the capacity of people to cope with stress and catastrophe – is the hottest new topic in psychology, medicine and social sciences. Why is it that some people can recover from life's problems – from rejection in love to being hit by natural disasters – while others decline into depression or more serious mental illness?

In her new book, co-authored with Dr John Nicholson, *Resilience, Bounce Back From Whatever Life Throws at You*, Clarke analyses the secrets of resilient people, revealing which personality characteristics help people triumph in difficult times, but also which life events might help prepare you for future hardships.

"This has been a turbulent year for all of us," says Clarke, who specialises in coaching in the City. "We were seeing lots of traumatised individuals but it was clear that some people were weathering the recession more easily. We thought it would be useful to quantify what sets these people apart."

She and Nicholson have coined a new term, "Resilience Quotient", which measures your current resilience level

(using psychometric testing) just as IQ measures your intelligence level. And the good news is that everyone – even you flaky, eager-to-please types – can boost their RQ.

Resilience, says Clarke, is a skill we can learn. At first it takes massive concentration, but eventually it becomes automatic.

The book, endorsed by fashion guru Mary Portas, draws on 26 in-depth interviews with resilient individuals, plus questionnaires sent to 300 people, to isolate five key factors that set the RQ squad apart: optimism; freedom from anxiety; taking personal responsibility; openness and adaptability; and a positive and active approach to problem solving.

I would have assumed they all had happy, stable childhoods. But the first shock is that high achievers often come from broken homes or were forced to act as carers. Overcoming challenges – positive adaptation – at such an early age gives them a determination to succeed and a desire to make sure their own family doesn't suffer in the same way. Think Barack Obama, Charlize Theron or Kelly Holmes.

"Anyone in the political arena has to convey the impression of being immensely resilient. Love them or loathe them, they have to stand up there and take it on the chin," says Clarke.

Resilience shouldn't be confused with arrogance or narcissism. But you need a reasonably high degree of self-esteem. "For example, if you give the impression that you never take yourself seriously, why should anyone else do so?" Clarke warns. We need to take the credit for our own successes and reflect on how we attained them.

People with high RQ rarely experience envy. Energised rather than overrun by a crisis, they practise "ritualised

ingenuity" (always finding solutions when faced with a challenge). They go that extra mile. But they also know when to give in gracefully and cut their losses. Financier George Soros, for instance, always quits while ahead.

The RQ team also has what psychologists call an "internal" locus of control – they believe *they* are responsible for change, not outside events or influences. People with an "external" locus of control (people-pleasers) tend to become reactive and negative.

Resilience is not a fixed personality trait; it can fluctuate depending on what happens to you and how you handle it. In our twenties we have to make seemingly irrevocable decisions about work, love and home. At 30 our resilience is tested by having to admit mistakes or change direction. By our forties, we have hopefully mastered the

arts of balancing and juggling and are more tolerant of ambiguity.

But the good news is we can develop our natural powers of resilience at any age, through changing how we make decisions, cutting out procrastination, or "reframing" – a technique used by resilient individuals to make the best of a situation.

At one level, it's simple. We need to take better care of ourselves – exercise, eat healthily, sleep, take proper holidays. We need to live in the present (worrying is usually about the past or the future). But it's also important to have interests other than work (providing a source of relief, even escape).

People with high RQs break problems down into smaller chunks and deal with them one by one. They solicit others' opinions but understand decisions are rarely irrevocable: you make the best

decision you can and get on with it. Being "avoidant" damages your RQ.

It's also important to recognise your tipping point. What makes you panic or lose our cool? If you can identify which events affect you negatively, you can develop strategies. Maybe there's a reason you're not motivated to change.

RESILIENCE is about deciding how assertive you're going to be, and how co-operative. You need to be clear about what you want from life, and what you're capable of. According to Clarke, if you're made redundant the most important thing you can do is stay busy – learning a new skill, volunteering. It helps maintain confidence, adds to your CV and eases your passage back into work.

Resilience is a critical skill. In a stressful, fast-changing world it can even help inoculate against mental illness while boosting achievement levels and productivity. Resilient organisations are fixated with assessing failure as a means of improvement. That's why they search for the black box after a crash.

In the book is the fascinating case of a banker who survived the terrorist attack in Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace hotel. Working as a team he and four others climbed into a wheelie bin as bullets flew past. Interestingly, the people who panicked most were the lawyers. Used to analysing formal situations, they were the least tactical. In a crisis, thinking creatively really can save lives.

■ *Resilience, Bounce Back From Whatever Life Throws At You*, by Jane Clarke (£10.99, Crimson Publishing) is out on 18 January.

