

PART 1 OF THE 3-PART WHITEPAPER SERIES

PRESSURE IS NOT STRESS

4 Steps to be Resilient in Disruptive Times

By: Nick Petrie



NICK PETRIE

Contents

- 3** How Our Lives Get Disrupted
- 4** The Three Conditions for High Stress
- 4** What Causes Your Stress?
- 5** Life Events Scale
- 8** Four Steps for Mental Resilience
- 9** Step 1 – Reflect Rather Than Ruminare
- 10** Step 2 – Wake up and Stay Awake as Long as You Can
- 12** Step 3 – Refocus on Your Circle of Control
- 13** Step 4 – Detach and Put Things in Perspective
- 16** Summary
- 17** Resilience in Disruptive Times Virtual Workshops
- 18** About Nick Petrie

For the last 15 years, I have specialized in resilience during times of disruption. I have run workshops for people operating in high pressure organizations, ranging from Wall Street bankers, to NASA flight controllers, to staff in the White House (though not the current one). When COVID-19 hit, many organizations reached back out to me to ask if I could put together new tools and methods to help their staff through this pandemic and beyond. Based on the research on how people respond in times of adversity, I identified that staff needed three things to be resilient during these disruptive times:

1. Methods to decrease mental and emotional stress
2. Healthy habits that increase physical energy
3. A proven process to grow from the current adversity

In this 3-part series of papers, I'll share how individuals and organizations are learning to do all three of these points. In this first paper, we'll focus on four steps to decrease your stress and increase your resilience in disruptive times.

How Our Lives Get Disrupted

Why is it that two people can go through the same experience – illness, company merger, divorce – and have vastly different reactions? One person may become stressed and overwhelmed while the other person is..... resilient. In this paper we'll unpack 30 years of research that explains what these two people are doing differently.

I first learned about this research 18 years ago, when I was diagnosed with stomach cancer. I was playing rugby for a living in Japan when, during the final game of the season, I suddenly ran out of energy and had to leave the field. I could feel something was wrong. I flew home to New Zealand where my mother met me at the airport. She told me I looked sick and took me to the hospital. They did a series of tests and eventually operated and discovered that I had three big cancerous tumors in my abdomen. They did a 5-hour operation and took them out. It took me three months to recover. I couldn't eat and lost a lot of weight. When I could walk again, I went back to Japan and tried to put all the ingredients of my old life together. Twelve months later, the cancer returned, this time in my liver. The doctors used a procedure that promised only to work in the short term and told me there was

no other treatment available. What happened next was the same thing that happens to all cancer patients. Every three or six months you must get a new scan and wait for the doctors to tell you that either it has come back, or you are good for another three months. My mind went crazy. All I could think was, what if I don't live until I'm 30? What if it comes back? I was so stressed out.

At my worst point, I read an article about a researcher, Dr Derek Roger from the University of York. For 30 years, he had been studying why people have such different reactions to the same event. Dr. Roger had moved to New Zealand and he agreed to meet with me. For two hours, he taught me everything he had learned about how some people stay resilient. He also told me what to do for my own stress. I followed the doctors' orders and my stress levels started to reduce. Over time my stress went from 10 out of 10 on the resilience assessment he uses to 0 out of 10, which is where it remains now. The cancer did return a number of years ago, and it is present but relatively stable in my liver. What is very different this time is that I don't spend a minute of my day stressing about it. The event is the same, but the stress is gone.

In this paper, I will share the method that Dr. Roger taught me and that I have since taught to thousands of leaders in workshops around the world. You can't always change the circumstances you find yourself in, such as a global pandemic, but you can learn methods and mindsets that help you to feel resilient and confident rather than stressed and anxious. I have learned this firsthand for myself and seen this approach work for many others who followed the same path. Here is what you need to know.

The Three Conditions for High Stress

Researchers have found that the conditions under which people are most likely to get stressed are:

- High sense of uncertainty
- Low sense of control
- The stakes seem high

When I share these conditions in workshops, people laugh. They say that these conditions pretty much sum up their lives in the era of COVID-19, work from home, cost cutting, and reorganizations. People say that they don't know what is going to happen in the future, that there is not much they can do about it, and that they know it will have a big impact on themselves and their families.

They want to be resilient. The question is how? The first step is understanding the process of stress.

What Causes Your Stress?

When we think about the cause of our stress, most of us point to the events happening in our life: our workloads, deadlines, and organizational changes. This seems logical. There are lots of events happening right now and I feel stressed, therefore, the events must be *causing* my stress.

Psychologists have even created an assessment based on this idea. It is called a life events scale and is shown in abbreviated form below.

Life Events Scale

The Life Events Scale is a list of about seventy items that starts with big events and goes all the way down to things like losing your keys. Each of the items is assigned a score for how stressful the event is supposed to be. The assessment asks you to check all the items that you have experienced in the last year and add up your total score. This tells you how stressed you are supposed to be.

EVENT	'READJUSTMENT' SCORE
Death of a close friend/relative	100
Divorce	73
Personal injury/illness	53
Marriage	50
Retirement	45
Change in financial status	38
Son/daughter leaving home	29
Moving house	20
Change in sleeping patterns	16
Vacations	13
Christmas	12

But there are a couple of issues with this approach. The first is that most of the items on the list are unavoidable. These are not stressors; these are just life. If events really cause stress, then your only solution is to become a hermit and have no relationships, job, or life experiences. But most of us don't want that. We want a full life.

The second problem is that two people can go through the same event and have very different responses. Two partners may get divorced and at the end of the process one person may feel very stressed. How might the other person feel? Relieved, relaxed, no stress! Same event, vastly different response.

Separating Pressure from Stress

The researchers wanted to know what was causing these different responses. They identified two important ideas. The first was that there was a difference between pressure and stress. Most of us lump these together as if they are the same thing. If you combine pressure and stress together then stress is inevitable. But when you split them apart you now have some options. Pressure is defined as external demand in your environment. Do you think everyone in your team has pressure on them? Of course. Do you think that everyone is stressed? Maybe. Maybe not.

The researchers found that to convert pressure into stress, people had to do something very specific, and that people who weren't doing this action weren't getting stressed. That specific action was ruminating about events.

Rumination

Rumination is thinking over and over about events from the past or future and attaching negative emotion to them.

Think about a time in your life when you felt very stressed and notice the extent to which you were ruminating. Now think of an area of your life where you have high pressure but have no stress. Notice that you don't ruminate about that area of your life. As part of my work I meet CEOs and leaders who have extremely high levels of pressure but very low stress. Do you also know people in your life who have very low levels of pressure yet very high levels of stress? How do they do it? They very likely sit around and ruminate.

The Impact of Rumination

You might recognize that you ruminate, but why does it matter? It matters for three main reasons. The first one is your health. When we anxiously ruminate about imagined future events, our body responds as if it is physically threatened and puts us into a state of fight or flight. We produce adrenaline, which speeds up our heart rate. In small doses, this is fine but when we keep on ruminating, it puts a strain on our heart which leads to the buildup of plaque and an increased risk of heart disease. Chronic ruminators have increased incidence of heart attacks.

The second hormone produced is cortisol, which is also fine in small doses, but to produce it we put white blood cell production on hold. As a result, chronic ruminators have suppressed immune function. The more we ruminate, the more at-risk we become of getting sick.

In addition to the negative health effects, ruminators tend to be less productive because they are not mentally present enough to get anything done. They spend much of their time trapped in endless rumination loops inside their head, and while they are busy replaying these stories, what are they not doing? Work!

Finally, how do you feel when you are ruminating on and on? Most people tell me they feel exhausted and miserable. Put all of the above together and we would say there is nothing useful about stress; that all it gives you is a shorter, miserable, and unproductive life. Other than that, there is nothing wrong with it!

What about “good stress” some people ask?

My uncle who is a successful entrepreneur, said to me, “Nick, I love stress.”

I explained to him about rumination and asked, “Do you love to ruminate?”

“No, never” he replied, “That is a waste of time.”

What does my uncle love? He loves pressure. He enjoys challenges, goals, deadlines, and progress. Many of the leaders I work with are A-type personalities who love pressure. Pressure can be healthy. Rumination just leads to a short, miserable life.

Reflection question – *What is the area of your life that you are mostly likely to ruminate about? How helpful is it?*

Four Steps for Mental Resilience

At this point in workshops people start to talk about different areas they are ruminating about and have a ton of questions. But once they have got those off their chest, they all arrive at the same question, "I now understand the problem, but what do I do about it?"

The first thing we do is have people take the Resilience Assessment which measures you on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high) on 8 resilience scales. The first scale we measure is your level of rumination. People find this absolutely fascinating and are amazed to see that, despite all the changes and pressures that exist in their company, some of their colleagues score 0 on rumination. I once debriefed the assessment results with the executive team of a healthcare company. The CEO got an 8 on rumination and was shocked (!) that his CFO scored a 0 and the rest of his team were below 3.

He laughed and asked, "Am I the only person who cares about this company?"

His laughter was because he knew his team were just as dedicated as he was. But for his whole career he had assumed that if he wasn't worrying, he wasn't caring. He had just discovered that his teammates were all getting the job done by caring about the work but not ruminating. Some of you may be thinking, perhaps he became the CEO *because* of his rumination. Not true. Most CEOs I know have very low rumination scores. That is how they handle the pressure of the job. In this case the CEO recognized that he had made it to the top *despite* his rumination and over the next 6 months he successfully reduced his rumination level while maintaining high levels of care and motivation for the job.

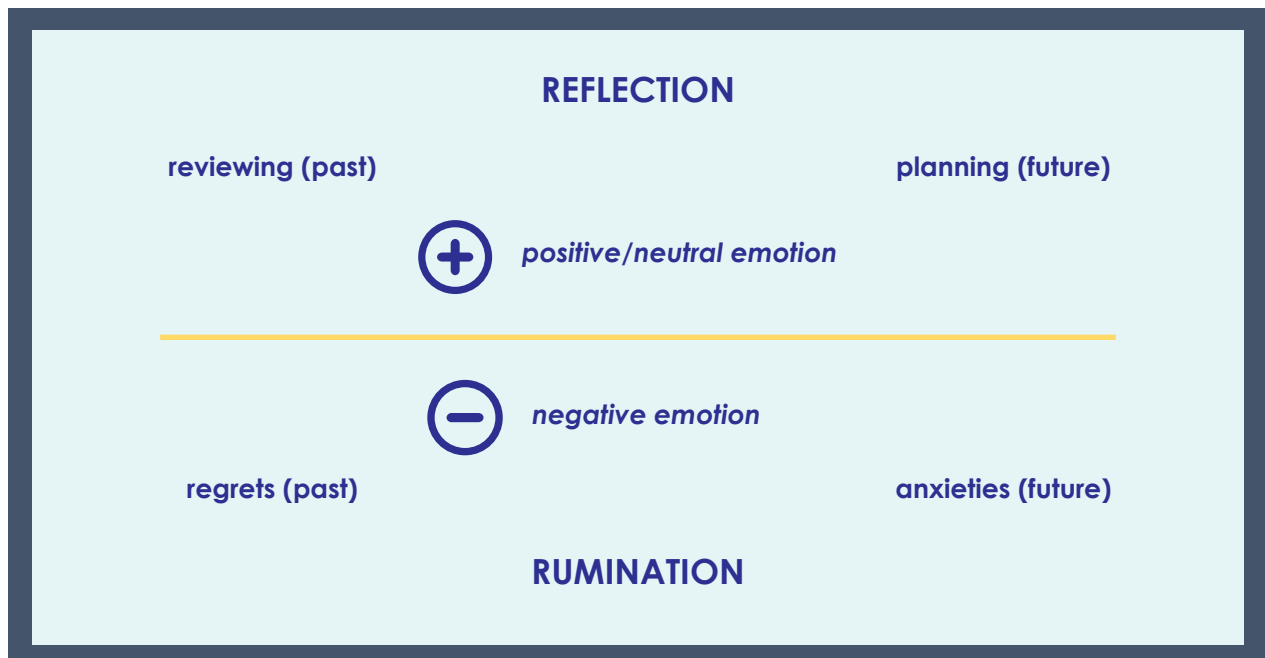
Dr. Roger identified 4 steps that help bring rumination down. These are the ones he taught to me and that I used to take my R score from 10/10 down to 0. I have adapted the steps slightly based on my experience working with leaders in large companies and what I have seen as most helpful for them. Let's take a look at each.

Step 1 – Reflect rather than Ruminating

I once worked with a group from an energy company. When I explained the concept of rumination, one of the leaders asked the question that the others were thinking,

“Are you telling a group of power plant operators that we shouldn’t think about what could go wrong?”

The answer, thankfully, was no. Whether you run a power plant, lead a business, or are living through a pandemic, it is essential that you consider what might happen in future and make plans for it. Equally, we need to look to events from the past and learn lessons from them. The key is making sure that we are *reflecting* on our challenges and not *ruminating* on them.



When we review the past or plan for the future with a positive or neutral emotion, we call this reflection or *above-the-line thinking*. Reflection is essential for good leadership and people are unlikely to get stuck in a cycle of endless reflective thinking. If your boss compliments your work during the day it probably won't make it hard to get to sleep at night or wake you in the middle of the night thinking, “Why can't I stop thinking about that compliment?”

Rumination, on the other hand, occurs when you add in the negative emotion and get stuck in a downward spiral of *below-the-line thinking*.

The key is that when you catch yourself fixating on a challenging situation, stop and ask yourself, “Am I reflecting in order to make a plan, or am I ruminating and making myself stressed?” Remember, the former helps you make progress. The latter leads to a short, miserable life. Choose wisely!

Step 2 – Wake Up and Stay Awake

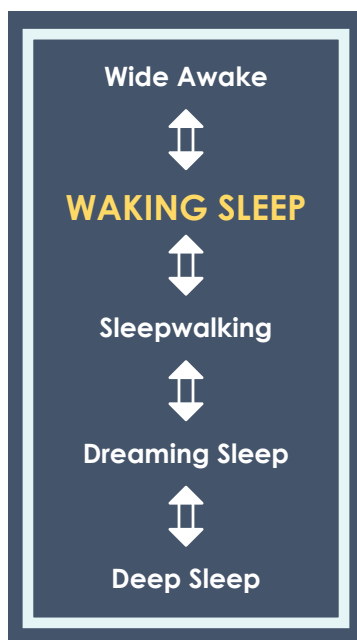
as Long as You Can

Have you ever had the experience of being in a meeting when someone turns to you and says, “What do you think we should do?” As everyone turns to listen to your great idea you realize you haven’t heard a word in the last two minutes. Where were you? You were asleep.

Most of us think of sleep like a light switch – you’re awake or you’re asleep. However, when you put brain-wave monitors on someone’s skull you discover that sleep is a continuum.

While most of us assume we are awake during the day, researchers estimate that we spend up to 70% of our day in the state of waking sleep. You may be in a meeting, but you are really dreaming about the past or future. I see this at the start of workshops I run. When I introduce myself and say that I am from New Zealand, I can see half the room drift into thought, “I’ve always wanted to go to New Zealand. How long is the flight and who would I go with?” They are in waking sleep planning their vacation and it takes about 30 second before they hear anything else I say.

The reason that waking sleep matters so much to your resilience is because all of your rumination takes place in this state. Therefore, if you want to stop ruminating, the first step is quite simple. Wake up!



The way to wake up is to literally come to your senses. When you do this, it brings you back to the present moment and out of your dream.

→ **Wake up Exercise:**

Take a deep breath and pay attention to what you can feel in your body right now.....next, listen to the sounds you can hear in your environment.....next, look around and notice three colors or patterns you hadn't previously noticed. Finally use all three senses at once. If you are doing this right now, then you are *wide awake*. See how long you can stay awake.

The more you catch yourself ruminating and wake yourself up, the more you will feel your stress reduce. Your homework for the next 48 hours (or for the rest of your life) is to pay attention to how often you are in waking sleep. When people start to do this, many are shocked to see how much of their life they spend living in a dream.

As I started to wake myself up again and again, I saw my rumination level drop from 10/10 on the assessment down to 0/10 over the course of two years. It was a game changer.

→ **Exercise: Find a Rumination Partner**

One of the most helpful things for bringing rumination down is expressing your emotions. Two friends I worked with decided to become rumination partners. If anything was on one of their minds, they could go to the other person's office and vent for 5 minutes. The rules were that the other person wasn't allowed to try to solve the problem, give advice, or get involved. It worked perfectly. Once or twice a week one of them would walk into the other's office and express their woes for 5 minutes. Then the other person would do the same about a topic on their mind. The visitor would then stand up and leave with both feeling much better and less burdened. Who might be a good rumination partner for you?

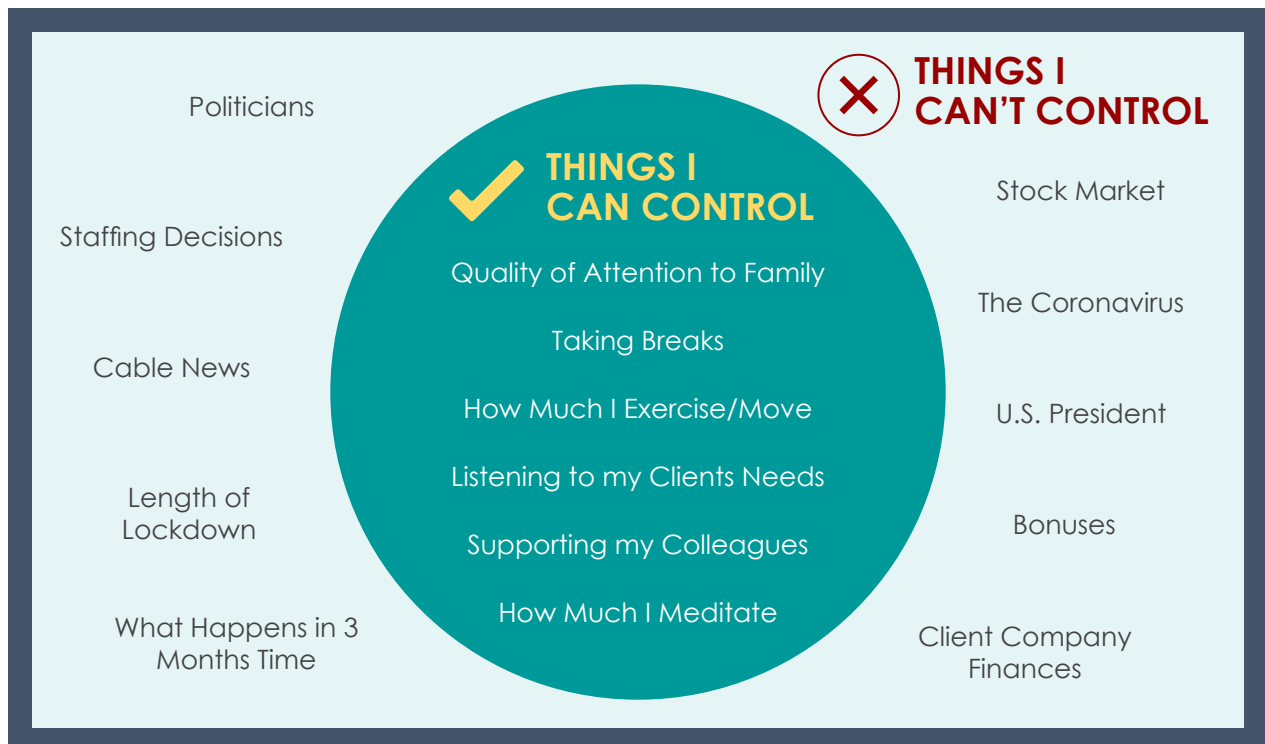
Step 3 – Refocus on Your

Circle of Control

When we get stressed it is often because we spend a lot of time thinking about things we cannot control. During COVID-19, this has become particularly common with people spending a lot of time on social media and reading the news. Their attention has become fixated on areas they have no control over.

In workshops, I ask people to draw a big circle on a page. They then take 5 minutes to write down all the things that they cannot control outside of the circle. Then they write all of the things they can control inside of the circle.

As people get into discussions on their visuals, many are amazed to see how much of their time they had been thinking about the uncontrollables in their life and how little time was spent on things they could control. Some people have told me that this simple seven-minute exercise had a profound effect on how they dealt with adversities in their life going forward. Try it now for yourself, or as many leaders have done, do the exercise with your team.



→ Exercise: Your Team's Circle of Control

One organization I worked with was going through staff reductions and a reorganization. It was a very unsettling time. Several leaders brought their teams together to identify what they could control over the next three months and what they could not. Team members then made a commitment to remind each other to “stay focused inside our circle.” The teams that did this came through the experience with significantly less stress and higher performance. These were the team's discussion questions:

- What is outside of our circle of control over the next three months? What is inside?
- Where are we currently focusing most of our attention?
- How can we support each other to keep our attention inside our circle of control going forward?

Step 4 — Detach and Put

Things in Perspective

In one workshop, a CEO told his fellow leaders how he had learned to keep his rumination scores low.

“In my old job as a surgeon, when things went wrong someone died. With my current work, there is plenty of pressure and I really care about us doing well. But I never ruminate because I remind myself, ‘Nobody's dying.’”

This is a good example of a leader who has learned to do the fourth step well – Detach. People who master this fourth step do two things well. First, they find ways to keep things in perspective. Second, they don't personalize things which don't belong to them.

The opposite of this approach is when we take things personally and “catastrophize.” We think of worst-case scenarios and play them over and over in our heads. This does not help us solve the problem and as Mark Twain said, “Most of the worst things in my life never happened.”

In our Resilience Assessment, people’s scores for detachment and rumination tend to be inversely correlated. This means that people who score high in detachment tend to score low in rumination, and vice versa.

Detachment does not mean cold or aloof. In the assessment, we also measure sensitivity. The leaders who are most effective usually score high in both sensitivity and detachment. These people make good coaches, managers, and doctors. They are very caring and empathetic to your situation. But they don’t take on your emotions and problems as their own. They are there to help you with your situation and feelings, not to take ownership of them.

One of the fastest ways to decrease your rumination levels is to practice keeping things in perspective. I have interviewed many leaders who do this well and noticed three methods they use.

1. Contrasting – This involves comparing what you are currently ruminating about with something that is much bigger and more important in your life. For some people, this is done through their religion by asking, “How big is this event in comparison to my faith in God?” For others, it is an important value they have. I have heard many leaders say, “As long as my family is OK everything is OK.” A second approach is to compare your current worry with past events you’ve experienced that were much bigger. A final method is to have a phrase that shrinks things down to size. One company I worked for made food products including for pets. It was full of A-type personalities who were

intensely driven to meet their goals. But when people would get stressed out someone would invariably remind the group, “Guys, we make dog food.”

2. Gratefulness – Researchers have found that one of the best buffers against stress is focusing on what you are grateful for. Psychologists have found that we can only really give our attention to one thing at a time. **When you focus on what you are grateful for, you crowd out the rumination.** This doesn't mean that your issues will go away. But it will change your emotional state and put you into a better mindset to take positive action. This can be true even for big events. I reflected for a long time about what I was grateful for about my cancer experience. I concluded that it woke me up, made me determined not to waste my life, and to choose a career where I could make a meaningful difference. The event itself was not inherently good, but I was able to extract a lot of good from it. I've seen a number of people using the pandemic to work through a similar reflection process.

3. Reframe Anxiety as Excitement – One of the most intriguing findings out of recent research is that the biochemistry of anxiety is almost identical to that of excitement. Researchers found that when they asked people who were anxious to mentally relabel what they were experiencing as excitement, people not only shifted how they felt, they also improved their performance! This small reframing was enough to shift people from what researchers call a “threat state” to a “challenge state.” It is remarkably simple and if you try it out you may be surprised by how effective it is. If I ever feel anxiety before a workshop or speech, I ask myself, “What am I grateful for about this opportunity and what am I excited about?” It always works. Try it for yourself.

Final Thoughts

As you read this there is a good chance that the world around you is in flux. But this isn't just this moment in time, it is the nature of life. Things look permanent and stable, but they are not. Cells, individuals', organizations, and societies are in a continual process of forming and dissipating. We want life to be full of certainty and permanence, but that is not the nature of our existence. At the core of why we continue to ruminate on and on is that we become attached to our ego's desire for the world to be and remain a certain way. But this idealized world keeps slipping from our grasp.

The approach outlined in this paper is a different way of interacting with the world. It allows you to respond to the challenges of life without getting attached to them. This helps you to face pressure without turning it into stress. But remember your Rumination will not disappear overnight. It is a habit of mind that has built up over many years. The key is to catch your rumination as quickly as possible and apply the four steps.

1. Reflect rather than ruminate
2. Wake up and staying awake as long as you can
3. Focus on your circle of control
4. Detach and putting things in perspective

As you practice this over time you will notice that you ruminate about fewer and fewer things. Along the way you will continue to get hooked by the everyday problems of life. When this happens do not be hard on yourself. Instead, reflect on the story of how to catch a monkey in the forest.

To catch a monkey you begin by building a small cage and putting some peanuts in the middle of it. Then you create a hole that is big enough for a monkey to put its hand through, but small enough that once it grabs a peanut and makes a fist, it cannot pull out its hand. As the monkey struggles with the peanut, you run up and capture it. The monkey has made a fatal mistake. If it had lifted its gaze and looked around it would have seen that the forest is full of food. Yet it gives up its whole life for a peanut. Most of the stuff we spend our days ruminating about is not the life and death things. It's the peanuts. Next time you catch yourself ruminating on and on, remind yourself, 'It's a peanut. Let it go'.



The second resilience paper in the series is **Recharge: 5 Steps to Increase Your Energy in the Work from Home Era**. We look at how to build habits and routines that help you recover and re-energize despite the disruptions that many people are experiencing right now.

Resilience in Disruptive Times Virtual Workshops



To inquire about running a resilience workshop for your organization email admin@nicholaspetrie.com or visit www.nicholaspetrie.com.

Decreasing Stress in Disruption

We have all been given good advice on the behaviors (wash hands, social distance) we can do during COVID-19. The second issue however is how we are thinking and feeling and how this impacts our health, decision making and actions. This session draws upon 30 years of research on how people react during times of adversity and the most effective ways to cope. In this session you'll learn:

- The three conditions under which people are most likely to feel stressed
- How our reaction to disruption impacts our stress levels
- The importance of resilience on our health during disruption
- Your resilience profile based on eight dimensions
- Four steps you can practice to decrease stress even in challenging times

Increasing Your Energy

Since many of us are now working from home, people have had long established habits and routines disrupted. In this session we will give you a process to design your virtuous cycle that is a set of habits that when you do them give you energy and put you in a good mood and productive state.

- Identify changes and challenges you are facing since working from home
- Do an energy audit of your current habits to find areas of greatest impact
- Learn about the power of Virtuous Cycles
- Learn about habit creation and the easiest ways to build new habits for life
- Make an action plan for starting your Virtuous Cycle
- Take immediate action to build your first new habit

Coping and Growth from Adversity

Building on the foundation from the first session this workshop will surface people's inner resources to deal with adversity and change. We will use storytelling to have people share their own experiences of overcoming challenges and the coping methods they used. We'll then focus on research proven tools and resources to help people think about how they grow and change from the experience they are having. In this session you'll learn:

- The most common challenges that people are experiencing in the work from home era
- The power of adversity to cause both stress and growth for individuals and organizations
- The three stages of disruptive change and the key actions to take in each
- How to support others who are going through difficult times

About Nick Petrie

Nick helps organizations prepare their leaders for a complex world. He's worked with global organizations including: Google, Walmart, Home Depot, NASA, TD-Bank, Wells Fargo, Kellogg's, Delta and Comcast. He has worked across industries including retail, engineering, tech, banking, pharmaceuticals, energy, health-care, finance, insurance, and television.

His specialty areas are leading in complexity and resilience under pressure.

Nick holds a master's degree from Harvard University and two undergraduate degrees from Otago University in New Zealand. He is the co-author with Derek Roger of the book *Work Without Stress: Building Resilience for Long-Term Success*. He's survived three bouts of cancer, giving him a new perspective on life.

He lives in Austin, Texas with his wife and four boys. Learn more at www.nicholaspetrie.com.



