

# From Resilience to WE-silience

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Published on 25.01.2023

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## FROM RESILIENCE TO WE-SILIENCE

- ◉ We at Awaris believe individual and shared organisational 'WE-silience' can be learned.
- ◉ Our research shows that an individual's perceived stress levels depend partially on their resilience, that resilience behaviours can be learned, and positive team habits can reduce burnout.
- ◉ It also suggests individual resilience often fails when a 'tipping point' of stressors is reached. This means organisations have a responsibility to intervene when the environment gets too stressful or toxic.
- ◉ Resilience is both an individual journey and a team/organisation journey, highlighting the importance of WE-silience.

We live in times that call for resilience. Whether it's adapting to climate change, the accelerating cycle of business transformation, finding calm in the midst of the attention economy, or collaborating in hybrid teams. It's clear that leaders and employees in organisations face many challenges.

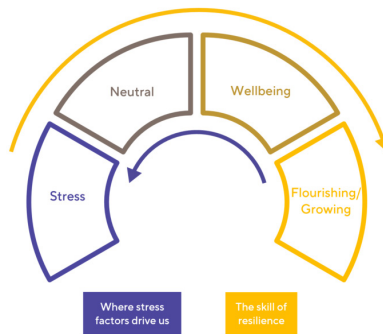
Responding to these challenges will require us to become more resilient as individuals. But this alone isn't enough. We also need shared resilience, or 'WE-silience', as we call it. WE-silience means cultivating the resilience of our human systems. Of our teams, departments, and business units. Our shared ability to handle stress, change, and learn. Human systems are unique. They can act with intentionality. We can shift and develop ourselves as a system, helping organisations become more resilient as a whole.

Healthy and resilient organisations know how to cultivate skills of WE-silience. This will

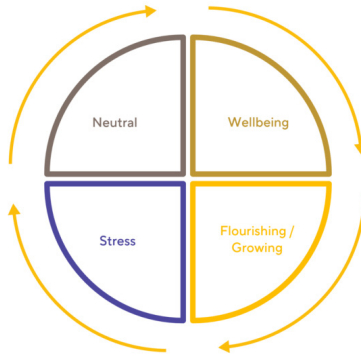
enable them to naturally cycle through phases of stress, regeneration, growth, and transformation. Just as emotional intelligence comes from a leader's ability to regulate their own emotions, a leader's ability to lead for WE-silience comes from their personal resilience intelligence.

## RESILIENCE AS THE ABILITY TO SHIFT FROM STRESSFUL STATES

We can speak of the challenges we're facing as stressors – events that influence us as humans – and that cause us stress. Stress leads to the activation of many systems in the body including the sympathetic nervous system. While this can feel unpleasant, stress in and of itself isn't bad. It's too much stress or constant stress that's the problem. There's a substantial body of evidence showing that prolonged stress contributes to poor mental health, such as depression, substance abuse, or emotional disengagement. It can also lead to physical ill health, such as high blood pressure or even strokes.



Clearly, it's important we don't get too stressed for too long. We need tools to shift our internal state. From stressed, to neutral, to regenerating, and then growing (see chart above). The ability to change internal states in this way is true resilience. We feel it's important to expand the definition of resilience to encompass this ability to shift between these important internal states. Neuroscientist Richard Davidson measured resilience by testing how quickly participants could return to baseline after exposing them to a negative emotion. If we become better at shifting our state, then the picture looks more like this (see chart below), moving all the way up from stressed up to flourishing.

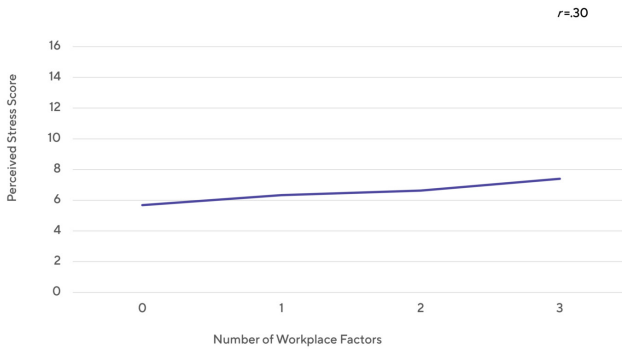


These same mechanisms are true for organisations as a whole. They need to balance and change their state. To adapt to the outer environment and respond to stress. To regenerate, learn, and grow. And for this, WE-silience is important.

## KEY DATA-INSIGHTS INTO RESILIENCE AND WE-SILIENCE

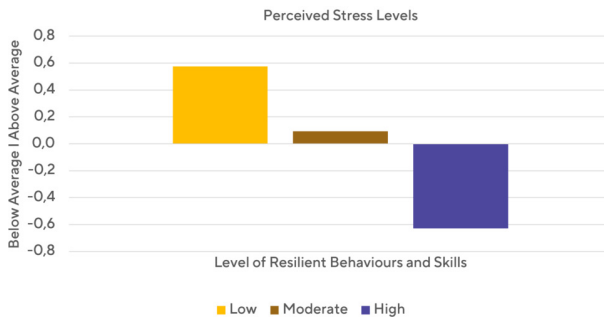
In the last six months, Awaris has helped people assess their own resilience and stress levels. Four things stand out from our research.

**1. Stress factors and perceived stress aren't always correlated** – This means that if someone is exposed to more stressors, they might not report higher perceived stress. The chart below shows the aggregated data from 1200 assessments. We asked people about their perceived stress using the well-established perceived stress scale. We also asked them which workplace factors they identified as stressors and how serious these were. Scoring these stressors and plotting them against perceived stress we found a low correlation (see chart below). This is important. It implies perceptions of stress in individuals aren't necessarily determined by the external stressors they're exposed to. This suggests one's resilience might explain their ability to cope with stress. However, this relationship breaks down when individuals face multiple stressors – which we'll address in the fourth point.



**Fig. 3** Small correlation between the number of workplace stressors and perceived stress.  
 Source: Awaris data of N=1200 participants of the resilience screening

**2. Resilience Behaviours can be learned** –Many people naturally assume some people are just tougher and thus more resilient. But we found something interesting. The more people engaged in Resilience Boosting Behaviours, the lower their perceived stress which suggests that resilience can be developed. The charts below show this for our sample of 1200 employees. The more people engaged in resilience boosting behaviours the lower were their levels of perceived stress and the higher were their overall resilience.

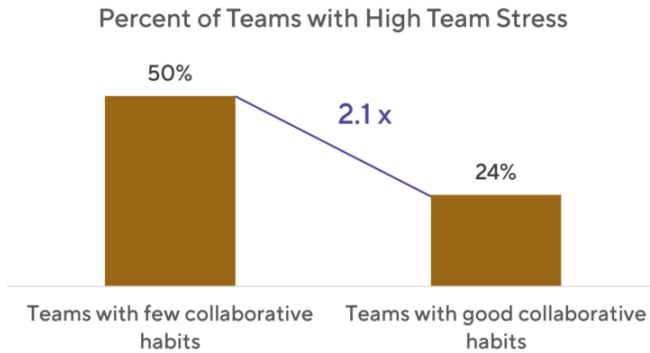


**Fig. 4:** The higher the number of resilience skills and behaviours, the lower the perceived stress. Normed scores of perceived stress, a score of 0=average score of sample (Perceived Stress =6.68 (the cutoff for chronic stress = 7.0).

Source: Awaris data of N=1200 respondents of the resilience

**3. Positive team habits can reduce incidence of stress and burnout**– We also asked team members about their stress levels, and which resilience and collaborative habits are established in their teams. The chart below shows the percentage of teams that have more

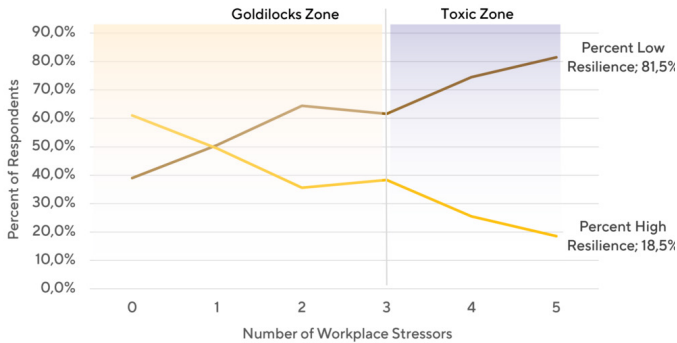
than a third of team members with elevated burnout scores in two groups. Those that had good habits of resilience and collaboration (we asked about 24 concrete habits including checking-in with each other, maintaining a positive tone, and avoiding fragmentation) had markedly lower levels of burnout. Tellingly, the aggregated team stress scores were more predictive of poor team habits than differences between individuals. This indicates that there's a key team-level stress and resilience variable. The results show that stress isn't just a topic for the individual. Burnout risks can be countered by positive team habits and be massively lowered at the team level.



**Fig. 5:** Percentage of teams with more than 1/3 of team members with highly elevated stress scores in relation to the amount of good collaborative habits they have integrated in their teamwork.  
*Source: Awaris data of k=84 teams with over N=770 team members.*

#### **4. Stress factors and perceived stress ARE highly correlated when external stressors pass a tipping point**

– Point one came with a caveat. We did find the correlation between stress factors and perceived stress increased when the stressor load increased. This tipping point was reached whenever three or more workplace stressors, such as high workload, plus some private stressors, were present. In the normal ('goldilocks') zone of life, there's no obvious correlation between stress factors and perceived stress. But when the stress factors get more extreme, there's a clear impact and resilience declines. In these high stress or toxic environments, personal resilience won't be enough. The chart below shows the percentage of participants who identify themselves as being highly resilient, plotted against the number of stress factors they're facing. In the middle 'goldilocks' zone, there is no clearly discernible trend. A small rise in external stressors isn't associated with a much lower percentage of resilient employees. However, in the toxic zone a clear divergence is visible. We found 4.5 or more stress factors led to a sharp decline in the percentage of resilient employees.



**Fig. 6** Percent of respondents high and low daily resilience in relation to the number of workplace stressors. Daily resilience is defined as the ability to relax and recover well at the end of a stressful day  
*Source: Awaris data of N=1200 respondents of the resilience screening*

When facing multiple stressors, people also engage in fewer positive resilience behaviours. It's well-established from behavioural science that chronic stress makes us less flexible. Robert Sapolsky: "These stress effects on frontal function also make us perseverative – in a rut, set in our ways, running on automatic, being habitual. We all know this – what do we typically do during a stressful time when something isn't working? The same thing again, many more times, faster and more intensely."

This has profound implications for thinking about resilience. It's not only that wellbeing declines in times of high stress, but also that people's resilience and self-regulation skills decline. Our ability to cope with stress declines as well. We can neither experience well-being nor be expected to have strong resilience skills in high stress zones. **The more we're in a toxic stress environment, the MORE it's the responsibility of the organisation to address it.**

This point was strongly made in a recent McKinsey article on burnout in organisations. "Employing these types of interventions may lead employers to overestimate the impact of their wellness programs and benefits and to underestimate the critical role of the workplace in reducing burnout and supporting employee mental health and well-being" (McKinsey, 2022). Individual resilience should indeed be boosted, while organisations and teams need to take responsible actions towards limiting the amount of stressors people are exposed to. In other words, they need to become truly WE-silent organisations. And this is what a number of our programmes at Awaris aim to implement.

# MOVING FROM RESILIENCE TO WE-SILIENCE

Taking into account the data, we see four key takeaways for organisations:

1. Facing a normal amount of workplace stressors, **it's the individual's responsibility to manage stress levels.** Just like we manage our calories, we'll all be called on to manage our stress levels and strengthen our resilience skills. This is a lifelong journey.
2. **Organisations must help employees boost their resilience skills.** These skills are as important as project management or leadership skills. This is something that Awaris can assess on an organisational level.
3. In teams, it's not just OUR stress level or resilience that matters. **There's a clear TEAM effect.** Teams need to anchor resilience and collaborative habits into the way they work together in order to support team members' wellbeing. Working on team-level habits is more effective than on individual-level habits only.
4. And finally, organisations can't just place the responsibility for managing an increasing number of stressors on individuals. **They need to prevent high-stress areas or toxic situations from arising in the first place.**

Resilience building needs to be an active strategy. At the individual level, at the team level, and at the organisational level. In other words, comprehensive WE-silience.

A wise person once noted that a shift from illness to wellness is a shift from 'I' to 'we'. We see two profound shifts that companies must go through to achieve sustainable performance:

1. A shift from emphasising wellbeing as a state, to resilience as a skill.
2. A shift from 'I' resilience to 'We'-silience. An organisation needs the ability to shift its inner states according to outer demands. Transforming its culture, experiences, and the behaviours of its people. This has an impact on team and individual level resilience.

Only after these shifts can companies tackle the wellbeing, engagement, and burnout crisis so many are experiencing.

**Upcoming blogs:**

**Blog 1 – From Resilience to We-Silience: a multi-level view of resilience**

**Blog 2 – How to build individual resilience: the 12 key resilience skills**

**Blog 3 – How to build We-silience: building team and organisational habits**

**Blog 4 – Leading with We-silience: building leaders' resilience intelligence**

**Blog 5 – Discuss the role of mindfulness in building resilience.**

**Blog 6 – Resilience profiles**