

Can we choose to be happy?

As I continue to ponder the keys to resilience, I've concluded that this act of choice is a vital step – and it fits with the principles of mindfulness.

Yes, there are some people who are temperamentally cheerful and adaptable, but I see many more who get stressed time and again by everyday life, as I do.

Compare your sense of life now with five or ten years ago: probably you're facing more uncertainty and complexity, more information overload, and an understanding that this is no blip – it's an ongoing trend.

What helps me is noticing the points when I feel anxious, overloaded, and choosing to stay cheerful instead. This is the first two steps in Wisdom Tree's five-step calmer:

Get centred: take several long, deep breaths. Put your attention on your breath, let go of thoughts and feelings.

Happy picture: I remember someone or something that's positive in your life – maybe a family member, a friend, a pet, a favourite place.

Step 1 is a basic mindfulness technique, helping us to remember that we are not our emotions – they are a part of us, and getting physically centred restores our ability to choose. If we keep choosing such qualities as trust and gratitude, we are strengthening our resilience.

I try to see any challenge as having benefit, so on a good day, I use the moments of stress and anxiety as a reminder that life is calling me to learn yet more about choosing to be happy.

As Williams and Penman explain in their book on Mindfulness, even a brief negative feeling often triggers a cascade of self-criticism and memories which get us believing everything is difficult. What they call 'habit breaking' is crucial to changing this pattern: life is inviting us to choose to be happy, repeatedly!

