Emotional resilience simply refers to one’s ability to adapt to stressful situations or crises. More resilient people are able to “roll with the punches” and adapt to adversity without lasting difficulties, while less resilient people have a harder time with stress and life changes. We all know someone who seems much better at handling stress or a difficult situation that someone else does. To some degree, emotional and physical resilience are something we are born with. Some of us have always been the “sensitive kind” while others are not bothered by anything. Some of us don’t like rugged physical activity while others can play in the mud all day long! Both biological and social factors contribute to personality development, so there is something about being “naturally resilient” that is out of our control. However, psychological and social research have demonstrated that emotional resilience is something that can be learned or improved upon no matter what level of it we are born with. Adolescence is also the time in life where we build upon previous skills and learn new ones. IMSA kids are presented with lots of opportunities to explore what has worked in the past and doesn’t work anymore. You can observe and learn new ways of coping.

**Characteristics shared by emotionally resilient people**

- **Emotional Awareness**: They can identify what they are feeling and why they are feeling that way; i.e. “I’m not feeling sad, I’m feeling angry *(the feeling)* about what Jean said in class today *(the event)* because it hurt my feelings *(the reason)*.

- **Perseverance**: the motto here might be “the only way to get through it is to go through it.” Resilient people are often action oriented and don’t give up, even if they are not succeeding or doing things perfectly.
- **Internal Locus of Control**: These people believe that they are in control of themselves most of time and that they have a choice in most situations.

- **Optimism**: Resilient people can see or find the positive aspects in most situations and believe they will handle whatever comes along.

- **Support**: They know the value of social support and are able to find and surround themselves with supportive friends and family.

- **Perspective**: Resilient people are able to learn from their mistakes rather than deny them, see obstacles as challenges to be overcome or adjusted to, and find meaning in difficult situations rather than seeing themselves as a victim of uncontrollable circumstances.

- **Sense of humor**: They are able to laugh at themselves and life’s difficulties as a way of coping with something unpleasant.

- **Handling troublesome emotions**: They have the capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses rather than give into them.

> A lot of the time it *does* depend on how we *choose* to see our internal world.
Ten Ways to Build Resilience
[Adapted from American Psychological Association: Help Center; www.apahelpcenter.org/featuretopics/features.php?id=6&ch=4]

1). Make Connections

- Good relationships with close family members, friends, or trusted adults are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Ever heard the expression, “don’t go it alone?” We need both positive and negative feedback in order to grow. This is best heard from people we trust and respect; people we feel connected to.

2). Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems

- Easier said than done! Unfortunately, you can’t change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to them. Interpret the situation or event realistically. Avoid getting down on yourself. Think things through before you respond. Get consultation!! Of course, some problems really do feel insurmountable, like the death of someone you care about or some other major setback in your life. Those things also
cannot be changed. They can only be endured in the best way possible. Resilient people use their connections when it is hard to accept the things they cannot change.

3). **Accept that change is a part of living**
   - The one constant in life is that “things change.” Certain goals are no longer attainable, while specific situations are no longer tenable. In a book called *The Road Less Travelled*, Scott Peck states that once we admit and understand that life is simply difficult at times, it ceases to be so difficult. Folks who cannot tolerate change in their life-circumstances are the ones who suffer most.

4). **Move toward your goals**
   - Learn to know the difference between realistic and unrealistic goals. This does not mean that you don’t push or challenge yourself. It also does not mean that you shy away from difficult tasks that you are not familiar with. It does mean that some goals are currently unreachable unless smaller goals are met first. So, do something regularly, even if it seems like a small accomplishment, that enables you to move toward your ultimate goal (i.e.: Ultimate goal = have great time management skills; Smaller goal = write stuff down in
assignment notebook for one week to see if this helps). Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself “What’s one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me more in the direction I want to go?” Here’s a dumb example: I want to be a physicist, but I’m stressed out about all these classes and wondering if I can ever finish them successfully. What college will I get into? What if I can’t get into MIT? My life will suck! (Smaller goal): “Relax. Being a physicist is some years away. For today I can finish the problem set and talk with the teacher this afternoon about that one problem I can’t understand.” When you really think about it, this is how physicists, doctors, authors and teachers become physicists, doctors, authors and teachers; one step at a time.

5). Take decisive action

Sometimes we wish tough situations would just go away. Actually, that’s a pretty normal first response to a difficult situation or event. Resilient people act on these situations as much as they can. Rather than detach themselves and let somebody else worry about it, they take decisive action. The motto could be “When in doubt, just do the next right thing.” Usually, there is time to think about what might be done. Talk to people. Get information. Bounce ideas off someone. Ask a friend what they would do in a similar situation. Resist acting impulsively (unless you are being attacked by a shark). And yes, sometimes taking decisive action is “deciding to do nothing” until there is more information.
6). Look for opportunities for self-discovery
   - Resilient people are open to learning new things about themselves, even if these things might be unpleasant. One of the best ways to learn something about yourself is to go through a difficult situation. People who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, a greater sense of strength (even while feeling vulnerable), a more developed spirituality, an increased sense of self-worth, and a heightened appreciation for life. An unwillingness to discover new things about yourself can lead to denial and ignorance. We need to learn how we handle a variety of things in order to identify the things we want to change. That equals growth rather than stagnation.

7). Nurture a positive view of yourself
   - Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience. Negative self-talk is a big part of this picture. Talented and gifted people tend to be perfectionists and use negative self-talk at an early age. They get down on themselves for a variety of reasons, but usually for less than perfect performance in some situation. Talking bad about yourself to
yourself always reinforces the need to perform perfectly in order to manage a negative self image, i.e. “I did this well, therefore I am a good and worthy person.” Nurturing a positive view of your self means that “I am a good and worthy person regardless of how I perform.” This leads to self-acceptance in the face of less than perfect performance. So, learn to talk positive to yourself in the midst of stressful situations. The motto here might be “give your self a break.”

8) Keep things in perspective

Avoid blowing things out of proportion. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. This is much more difficult to do in an extremely stressful situation, like the death of someone close to you, but it is a characteristic of emotionally resilient people. An example closer to home: failing a class at IMSA is not the end of the world or your future. College awaits and this is just one of the many bumps that the road life will offer up to you.

9) Maintain a hopeful outlook
Some people are naturally optimistic; everybody else has to work at it! An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try to visualize what you want to happen, rather than worrying about what you fear most. For some reason human beings find it easy to focus on the negative aspects of their lives. Often times, we have to actively look for the good things and not allow the bad stuff outweigh them. Optimism is a choice.

10). Take care of yourself

You cannot develop emotional resiliency if you are depleted most of the time. Another fun motto is “Dead things don’t grow.” We have to feed and nourish ourselves or we end up empty. The expression “running on empty” means that you are just going through the motions and have nothing left to give. Know when you need time away. Pay attention to our own needs, feelings and signals from your body. Know when to rest. Incorporate play into every schedule. Exercise in whatever way you enjoy. Taking care of yourself can also be hard work. Sometimes limits have to be set with friends and family to safe-guard your time.