

Nourishing Resilience in Times of High Stress

Kris Bonham, RDN
Cynthia Moore, MS, RDN, CD-CES, NBC-HWC, c-IAYT



Kris Bonham, RDN is grateful that her passion and purpose aligned, allowing her to have served as a clinical dietitian, healthcare consultant, nutrition counselor, Health and Wellness

Coach, educator and speaker. She has taught the Emotional Brain Training method in a university setting, fitness/wellness facility and in her private practice. Her areas of work and interest are coming together in Nourishing Resilience, nourishingresilience.org, which nicely dovetails nutrition and lifestyle skills with self-regulation and brain retraining tools. Contact Kris Bonham at krisbrd0304@gmail.com.



Cynthia Moore MS, RDN, CD-CES, NBC-HWC, c-IAYT enjoys integrating health coaching and yoga-mind-body skills in the nutrition care she facilitates. She is in private practice,

co-leads Nourishing Resilience courses, teaches part time at Georgetown and serves as a contracted faculty for the Veterans Administration. She became a Solution method provider in 2002, an EBT trainer in 2008. She's led Nourishing Resilience groups (by prior names) in university and community settings since 2002. Contact Cynthia Moore at cynthya145@gmail.com.

During troubling times, our usual coping threshold can be challenged. The personal skills that promote balance and wise choice making (whether for food, activities like spending, or media viewing) can become compromised.

In this review, we will share the science and evidence-based resilience skills that inform *Nourishing Resilience Essentials (NRE)*—both the book and 7-week course. This RDN-led training enables clients to be in a balanced brain state more often and to make healthful lifestyle change.

What does stress and resilience have to do with it? RDs care for the whole person, yet we too may find responsively caring for ourselves to be more difficult during personal upheaval, loss, pandemic, or societal divisiveness. Even in times of relative tranquility, it can be challenging to accompany our clients through their turbulent times while also facilitating the lifestyle actions they want or need to improve health outcomes.

When in a resilient, balanced brain state, the prefrontal cortex and emotional/limbic brain work together in assisting us with seeing our healthful options. Looking through the lens of neuroplasticity and attachment science, we can see how our own implicit bias or the belief systems of our clients may influence perception, contributing to the outcome of successful behavior change or the opposite—staying stuck.

What Is Nourishing Resilience?

Nourishing Resilience (NR) is a skills-focused training in health and resilience that is based on science-informed evidence from Emotional Brain Training (EBT) and mind-body obesity management. The method is based on stress science, neuroplasticity, attachment science, and the skills of emotion regulation. The NRE book brings together guidance useful for clinicians as a resource and for clients as a workbook for the initial 7-week training.

There are six basic tools of the method, including Emotional Housecleaning, Damage Control, NR Check-In, Sanctuary Tool, Feelings Check, and Cycle Tool that all aid in cultivating balanced brain states. EBT, the early predecessor to NR, touched lightly on eating and moving as well as a primary focus on stress resilience. In NRE, the lifestyle guidance is expanded to include a weekly focus on the body-brain-balancing elements of healthful eating/nutrition, sleep, movement, and self-compassion.

The training includes weekly small group sessions, skill-building, and accountability. Originally delivered in person; during the pandemic, it has been offered effectively via Zoom. Group class sessions offer a safe, positive, and supportive environment to do the work of adapting neural patterns and revising habits.

Nourishing Resilience Essentials Training: How It Works

"Authentic, Approachable, Actionable—something I can do." – Genevieve B, Participant

NRE introduces clients to a method for interrupting stressful

patterns, using tools they implement themselves to re-establish balance more quickly. Participants learn skills of self-regulation that allow them to be in a balanced brain state more often. In a stressed brain, humans reach for whatever relieves stress quickly. In a balanced or joyful brain state, beneficial food, activity, and relationship choices are recognized and accessed more often, thereby improving health. Several additional aspects of the training include the following:

- Provides a coherent framework and practice lab for building a personal toolkit of resilience strengthening tools
- Invites participants into a culture of self-compassion and connective relationships within the small group environment and offers the opportunity to practice self-acceptance regarding food choices or body shape/size and to reconfigure shame-filled thoughts or self-defeating patterns in a supportive setting
- During weekly sessions participants are encouraged to make evidence-based changes for metabolic health (eg, boosting omega-3 intake, increasing vegetables, eating meals/snacks that offer blood glucose stability, and inclusion of movement most days)

Transforming Stress Circuits to Effective, Balanced Circuits

Whereas our bodies are set up to handle acute stressors easily, it is the chronic or unmitigated stress of modern life that is most damaging and contributes to our stress (or allostatic) load.¹ Early life adversity and/or adult trauma, genetic predisposition and the presence or absence of secure connection early in life all influence the ease or difficulty humans experience during prolonged stress. Mental and physical health results when we return to a homeostatic balance sooner rather than staying in the distressed allostatic zone.

Secure Attachment

Many of us utilize external cues (rather than internal inputs) to help determine how to respond to stressors. But we are born, for the

most part, with the innate ability to self-soothe. And, if we were fortunate enough, those skills were nurtured during childhood. What we needed in childhood was to feel seen and heard. If we were parented in a responsive manner, then the skills of calming and self-regulation developed into an internal capability to return to emotional balance (achieve homeostasis) after an upset.

When we receive loving care and enjoy a secure attachment with a parent or caregiver, then we establish and build an inner safe place to reach into during times of stress. Our feeling of peace and strength come from within, and it becomes reasonable to trust ourselves. In NRE, participants learn how to utilize an NR Check-In to connect with themselves. NR Check-Ins may not make up for attachment deficits in early life, however, they are a form of connection that we as adults can use to rewire faulty or harmful patterns. When paired with the other five brain state tools used in EBT and NR, participants restore emotion regulation and balance more quickly and effectively.

Positive Neuroplasticity

We now know that neural circuits are malleable and trainable throughout life.² Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to form new neurons, create synaptic connections, and reorganize the use of neurons in response to experience, learning, or to an emergent need (such as after injury).

These last 2 years of pandemic have revealed our implicit biases and activated accompanying maladaptive circuits. Perceived threat may have elicited our prerational unconscious thoughts, beliefs, and impulses.

Unreasonable expectations are often the result of neural patterns and attachment to things that once offered safety, even if in the present they could be perceived as barriers or roadblocks. In a person's childhood they may have learned through experience that eating chips or cookies on return home at the end of a school day brought a sense of relief and security. Years later that same person may find that eating fatty, sugary foods mindlessly after an aggravating workday temporarily relieves stress, but isn't an effective long-term solution.

Circuits encoded within our emotional unconscious mind during childhood may or may not be serving us as adults. We can anticipate that early understandings about our sense of safety, power, innate worth, or ability to make wise choices would need to be updated. One of the tools in NRE works by identifying the unreasonable expectation, crafting a new reasonable expectation, and ultimately extinguishing an old maladaptive belief or behavior.

We understand that implicit bias informs our everyday actions. Some resources attribute 95 percent of our choices and behaviors to our unconscious mind and its implicit biases. That means that only 5 percent of our brain is doing the conscious work of remembering, prioritizing, and planning for action. So, when we support our clients in practical lifestyle decisions, such as whether to stop in the morning and eat before work, we may bump into their long-held, unconscious circuits of perfectionism or unworthiness. In NR, we identify and elicit these neural circuits from our unconscious mind and bring them to our conscious awareness so that we can weaken or negate them.

NRE training offers a framework for cultivating positive neuroplasticity for the purpose of revising neural/brain networks that favor health, wellbeing, connection, and stability. During the 7 weeks of NRE, participants practice specific mind-body skills of self-regulation, while aiming to gain 30 minutes or more of movement per day and to consume a balanced plant-intensive diet replete with omega-3 fats.

How does Nourishing Resilience fit into the context of nutrition care/therapy?

For many DIFM RDs who work with clients on weight and eating issues, it comes as no surprise that mindset, motivation, stress management, and support all factor into making sustainable progress. Consider how you and your clients may benefit from NR:

- NRE provides another way to work with obstacles to change. Sometimes when we teach nutrition, counsel patients, and coach clients, our efforts still fall short; we can hit barriers that thwart our clients' own best efforts.

It may be that a competing hard-wired pattern or survival circuit is hindering the proposed lifestyle change.

- NRE provides an opportunity to enhance self-regulation and affirm practitioners. For healthcare providers who embrace person-centered care, our personal attunement and self-care contribute to the therapeutic alliance. As a practitioner, it is helpful to reflect, stay connected to our best selves, and practice self-care, as we would encourage others in our coaching. When the practitioner maintains a secure base through self-regulation, our clients benefit. Using the skills of NRE helps us be fully and mindfully present, recover from daily/personal hassles, and stay attuned to what we personally need moment to moment, even as we care for others. Many psychologists, psychotherapists, and medical professionals in addition to RDs have enjoyed doing the training for themselves. When asked, we say, "Yes, you can benefit not only yourself but your clients." We have the opportunity to model the self-care practices we would want for those we treat.
- NRE offers support in building resilience. When a clinician knows a client's stress level is a factor in the clinical picture but doesn't know how best to proceed, NR skills can empower clients' resilience practices. Our therapist colleagues tell us that when they refer clients for NRE group training, there is an additive benefit on the progress clients make in individual therapy.

"By applying skills that boost resilience and support balance, ...the client is equipped with clear strategies to weaken detrimental habits and even their own internal tapes...and replace with more useful patterns and thoughts." – Mary Lou P, RDN

In our profession, we rely on skillfully guiding, educating, and coaching clients, and yet that alone may not have the impact that we desire for our patients. We'd be wise to acknowledge the power of the unconscious mind and its role in driving habits and decisions and further, recognize that there are steps and strategies to tap into the less conscious beliefs and repattern them for lasting change.

As DIFM RDNs, our integrative practice can potentially be refreshed by the principles and training offered in NR, with added appreciation for the role and reach our neural circuitry plays in behavior. The NRE workbook is available through Lulu.com starting in April, 2022. For clients or practitioners, accessing the 7-week NRE training generally starts with a single session Info/orientation session.

References

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nourishing resilience
essentials

