

RESILIENCE IS A DISCIPLINE

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Resilience takes work.

So much is said and written about resilience within the scientific and popular literature today that it can become confusing, even to the point of disagreement about how to define it. Are there genetic components that probably give some folks an edge simply by their birthright? (probably yes). Are there childhood experiences that can make it more difficult for us to be resilient adults (probably yes). Are there psychological profiles and biomarker clusters that correlate with how resilient or not an individual seems? (probably yes). Are there anatomical brain differences in the primary stress circuits of the brain (amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex) that may effect resilience? (again, probably yes).

All of the research that is now being done in these areas, including here at Headington, is rather exciting. In time we will know much more and with more certainty how all of this ties together. But we don't need to wait until a gold standard is reached before we can personally address the issue of resilience. There are already enough hints that indicate you can do something to improve your resilience, regardless of the hand you were dealt in life. The emphasis here is on 'do'. Resilience is not a passive sport. The more passive you are the more stuck you are with the that original hand you were dealt.

The more active and disciplined you are in following the hints and leads that are available, the more you can move beyond that hand to being more resilient. You are not going to get there by simply reading this blog post and thinking about it.

So based on the hints we have, what can you do now? In this and subsequent blog posts I'll go over some of the key suggestions based on the convergence of various fields of research.

Action item #1: Improve the quality of your social connections and support. Bruce McEwen, one of the most renown neuroscience researchers of our time, writes about the importance of what he calls 'social integration'. This is defined as "an individual's effortful engagement in social engagements and relationships, cognitive construal of her or his communality, and identification with diverse social roles." (McEwen, 2011). Say what?? Essentially Bruce is saying that research from many diverse fields all support the notion that having deep and varied social connections help us to have healthier and even longer lives. More importantly, the intentional effort to improve our social connections and support is essential. No matter what attachment style and relationship issues we emerged from childhood dragging along with us, we can take proactive steps from where we are to improve our resilience in this area.

So even if you are out on deployment in the weeds somewhere, make the effort to connect to those deployed with you, with staff from the local office, or folks from other NGOs in the area. Make use of the amazing connectivity that is penetrating more and more remote areas to keep in touch with friends and family at home. Yes, Skype can be frustrating at times, but what do you expect for free? If you are on an unaccompanied post, realize when you get home that you will have to make the effort to fit in with your spouse and family. They will warm up to you faster if you accept this and don't pout or complain about your reception. Accept the fact that you are going to be the one who initiates reconnecting to friends when you get home. Sure its not fair,



but for rather complex psychological reasons it just is what it is. Remember, we seem to get resilience 'bonus points' for making the effort, so do it and be the one to collect them.

Action item #2: The importance of physical exercise in promoting resilience. Anyone who has ever attended a security training or workshop where I have been presenting is well aware of the emphasis I place on this. Should you ever be so unlucky to find yourself signed up for one of these be sure to wear sneakers and comfortable clothes because you will be doing pushups, jumping jacks, sit-ups and the like.

So why the big deal about exercise? There are some obvious answers to this which is why most physicians worldwide recommend it. The cardiovascular benefits alone are compelling enough to start doing more of it. In addition it can help reduce your risk of diabetes and several kinds of cancer, help you combat depression and anxiety, increase bone density, help you sleep better and deeper, and improve your sex life. With a list like this I have to wonder why all of us aren't out exercising a couple of hours a day!

Another obvious benefit of staying physically fit is that it allows you to protect yourself better should you ever find yourself in a field situation gone bad. Especially for those of you who deploy or live in higher risk environments, being able to move fast and quickly is a clear advantage. If you had to run for your life, could you?

But no matter how compelling these reasons are they are not the source of my obsession about getting you to exercise. Rather this has to do with how the brain stress circuits function. In broad strokes, the research indicates that over time with exposure to overly stressful situations your amygdala (the alarm bell or freak out center) grows denser or bigger. Your prefrontal cortex and hippocampus get damaged and essentially shrink from the same experiences. Think of the hippocampus as a kind of shock absorber for the amygdala. When the amygdala freaks and sends out the screaming message for flight or fight, the hippocampus tries to provide context appraisal and question whether such a massive response is necessary. So what happens if your hippocampus starts to limp and not function well? Exactly! You'll start reacting to every bump in the road with an all hands on deck alarm – not a good thing. Over time you will most likely find yourself dealing with depression, post traumatic stress, anxiety and other resilience eroding issues.

So what does physical exercise have to do with this? Strangely the research indicates that exercise promotes neurogenesis in the hippocampus. Simply put it helps grow your hippocampus even if you are on the older side of life like myself. We don't know why this is the case although evolutionary psychologists have speculated about it. But we do know it happens. Using my bumpy road analogy, if you have better shock absorbers on your car, you'll be able to negotiate a tougher road without you or your car falling apart. Given that humanitarian aid workers seem to have some attraction to tougher roads, whether that be due to living conditions, organizational hassles, security threats, whatever, it just makes sense to have the best shock absorbers physical exercise can buy!

Hopefully you will get up from reading this post and feel so enlightened and compelled that you will go out and exercise. Just don't expect that your hippocampus is going to be bigger when you get back from your jog. It takes six to eight weeks for neurogenesis to occur. Sorry, no quick fix here. Hence the title of this article: Resilience is a Discipline - it takes work!