

MY DEFINITION OF RESILIENCE

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November 30, 2011

If I had a dime for every time someone asked me to define resilience, I would have quite a few by now. But confusion about resilience is quite understandable. Every book and magazine article has a different spin on the definition of resilience, and whether and how you can increase it.

I have been fortunate to spend the past couple of years researching and thinking deeply about resilience –my own personal resilience and resilience as a psychological characteristic. This article reflects both of these processes. I take my science seriously, so everything I present will be consistent with research I have read and conducted. But, admittedly, this isn't purely a work of science.

There is one defining characteristic of resilience that everyone seems to agree on – resilience is evident when we are confronted with significant trauma and stress. It's hard to assess resilience when things are going well, although good times may increase it. It's easier to measure it when we experience things we wish hadn't happened. Resilience determines how quickly we get back to our "steady state" after the air has been knocked out of us, when we must push through life circumstances that challenge our very being.

Let's quickly review what happens to the brain and the body when we face situations that require resilience. When you experience an extreme trauma or stressor, your physiology undergoes radical changes. Beginning in the depths of your brain, neurotransmitters and hormones tell your body that you are undergoing some type of threat. The adrenal glands, on top of your kidneys, get the message and flood your entire body with stress hormones. These hormones affect all bodily systems (cardiovascular, digestive, immune, metabolic, inflammatory, renal, etc.). And needless to say, stress has a huge impact on your brain. To put it in general terms, stress hormones move from the downstairs brain to the upstairs brain, where you access your memories and think in ways that are unique to you. If these hormones and chemicals go uncontrolled, they shut down your ability to make good decisions or think about anything other than the immediate threat. If your system stays on high alert, you end up with a brain that isn't thinking clearly and every physiological system on overload.

Fortunately, there are natural biological processes that facilitate our recovery from stress. A process called allostasis attempts to get all of the physiological systems back to their steady state after the stress response. However, numerous biological and psychological factors can interfere with allostasis. This is where resilience becomes important, because this amazing psychological characteristic facilitates the biological process of allostasis, getting our brain and body back to normal. So, what then is resilience?

There are three core psychological attributes at the heart of resilience: strength, meaning/purpose, and pleasure. If your personal life is characterized by these traits, you have the core components needed to build resilience. You feel equipped to handle both daily life and those challenging moments when you have to dig deeper. You also believe that you're contributing to the world in a way that helps others, consistent with what seems most important to you. Whether you believe that you exist in a universe controlled by a clearly defined higher power, or participate in the human collective that transcends your personal identity, your source of meaning helps you manage high stress and trauma effectively. And finally, pleasure. This isn't about drinking champagne at the French Embassy on New Year's Eve. It's about deeply enjoying that which enriches and



satisfies you. Whether it be poetry or pottery, movies or theater, having experiences that bring you a deep sense of pleasure are essential.

Strength, meaning and pleasure. These core attributes must be experienced on both an emotional and cognitive level. Resilience grows from both feelings and engagement in a thought life, bringing you strength, meaning and pleasure. Reading, thinking, working, praying, writing, conversing – these are just as important as emotional experiences that give you the feelings of strength, meaning and pleasure. The “Big Three” of resilience must be experienced both emotionally and cognitively for resilience to be fully developed.

Although it may be possible to build personal resilience on our own, we must have meaningful interpersonal relationships to build resilience most effectively. Relationships provide both emotional and cognitive opportunities for us to develop strength, meaning, and pleasure. This increases our personal resilience more than living life alone, in solitude.

So, why are these particular psychological attributes – experienced emotionally and cognitively, alone and in relationship – the key to building a resilient life? Let’s go back to the concept of allostasis for some possible answers. One reason why our body doesn’t return to a steady state after a stress response is because psychological reactions can hinder allostasis. If we catastrophize the event and think of nothing else, we keep the stress response from resolving. When we live a resilient life, we are more likely to put trauma, even severe life altering trauma, in a context that allows for the completion of allostasis. Our body can then heal itself.

With strength, we know we can survive. With meaning/purpose, we know there is a reason for us to live another day. With pleasure, we know that we have been given the ability to enjoy life deeply. Just as trauma is a reality in life, so is pleasure. When trauma comes, and the stress of life seems overwhelming, we can still experience strength and purpose. Eventually, pleasure will return. That’s resilience.

Here’s one final thought. We talked earlier about how stress hormones from the downstairs brain turn off the upstairs brain, where our ability to think and feel resides. Can you guess where such attributes as strength, meaning and pleasure reside? Of course, in the upstairs brain.

Is it possible that living a resilient life strengthens our upstairs brain to withstand the onslaught of the “fight or flight” hormones that would otherwise lead to battle or panic? Without much in the way of evidence, I will go out on a limb and say, “Yes.” I suggest that living with strength, meaning, and pleasure could build up the areas of our brain that help us recover the next time life goes awry. With more certainty, I believe that a life characterized by personal strength, meaning and purpose, and feelings of unencumbered pleasure embodies the definition of resilience. One day at a time.