

What is Psychological Resilience?

Resilience is something we probably all need a bit more of at the moment, as we get to grips with the recession and face possible financial hardships, job losses etc. But there are many other difficult and traumatic circumstances in life where it's a useful quality to be able to draw on. Resilience was a word originally used in physics: a body's ability to absorb impact. But in recent years the term has been used much more in relation to people and their ability to cope with difficult experiences: to come through them, perhaps even being strengthened by what has happened. Resilience is a mechanism that helps us to bounce back from the difficulties that life throws at us.

Resilience is usually seen as a personality trait: some people tend to be more resilient than others. But current interest and research is now focusing on how the quality of resilience can be enhanced in people: developed or strengthened. It is now thought that resilience isn't always a "given" in someone. It can be learned or developed, becoming an additional resource, particularly for those people who have been traumatised perhaps by serious illness, loss of a loved one, or being in an abusive relationship.

So what are the characteristics of resilient people?

- Their relationships with friends, family or their community, include an element of giving and receiving emotional support. These emotional connections with others are something we all need, and they bring about a sense of belonging and feeling part of something. They are also an important source of strength and support.
- They have some sense of their own autonomy or independence and are able to make choices or decisions without being dependant on the opinions of others too much. They also have a strong enough sense of themselves to feel they can hold their own with others.
- They often have good problem solving skills and are able to think things through and can take the necessary steps to achieve a particular goal or objective, even if it's only a small one.
- They usually have a positive view of themselves and feel confident in their strengths and abilities. We all have doubts about ourselves, but we also need to be able to overcome these.
- They are able to manage any strong feelings they may have when faced with a difficult situation. Sometimes these feelings can be overwhelming and it's important to find an appropriate place to express them, for example, with someone we know well and can trust. This will help us to contain our feelings at those times when it could be harmful or inappropriate to express them.
- They usually show perseverance. The things we want or strive for in life don't always come easily, so it's important to have an ability to remain focused, despite setbacks. Learning to be patient is perhaps part of this.

So how can we make ourselves, or those we are responsible for, more resilient?

One of the key elements of resilience is being able to cope with difficult or stressful situations. Our resilience will be enhanced if we feel supported in whatever difficulties we are facing. This has sometimes been expressed as a formula: growth = challenge + support. So we need to try and access good support where we can, whether through friends, family or the connections we make in the community; also through counselling or psychotherapy.

Another important component of resilience is being able to modify our thinking. It's very easy for us to feel worn down by the difficulties we face and this can sometimes make us feel hopeless or depressed. It's important that we try and stay optimistic and hopeful in these situations. Again support from others may help us to do this, but we can also do it ourselves by trying to change our negative thought patterns and using the resources available (see below).

Finally it is important that we try and remain flexible. We need to be able to cope with change and be open to new ideas and experiences despite what has happened in the past. This can be hard for someone who has been wounded by an earlier experience: it may make them want to close off and shut down. They perhaps become **resistant** to change.

Being **resilient** is different from being **resistant**: the latter is much more about keeping things out or fending them off (like the oyster shell on the sea-bed shutting when something threatens it). Resilience is much more about absorbing the impact of something that then brings about a change to the individual. A good image for this is the pearl that grows inside the oyster. It's the discomfort of the grit or grain of sand that leads the oyster to secrete a substance that then creates or enlarges the pearl. So good things can come out of difficult experiences.

Books:

"Resilient Therapy: Working with Children and Families" Angie Hart, Derek Blincow, Helen Thomas; Routledge UK (2007)

Websites:

wilderdom.com/psychology/resilience