Understanding Resilience

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What is resilience?

Resilience is the personal capacity to overcome extremely stressful situations without experiencing stress personally.

There are two main methods of achieving this.

The first, and more common, is passive resilience – where we effectively hang around waiting, or hibernate away from the challenges we face, hoping to emerge at some future date unscathed by the events. Active participation and engagement with the world around us may be muted, with us preferring to focus on whatever it takes to survive without being harmed. Individuals adopting passive resilience expend energy in hibernating, protecting themselves and avoiding the potentially threatening event and linked events.

Hanging around waiting for a potential event to mature into something or nothing often causes us to focus on survival more than focusing on normal everyday life. Personal performance becomes compromised as our concentration is hijacked by the need to focus on survival. It’s a form of hibernation caused by a degree of anxiety in anticipation of a likely event. It is, also, a time for preparation should the event mature into something that is potentially extremely stressful.

The other method is active resilience. This is when we actively set out to overcome the situation expecting not to experience any stress personally. This form heightens our interest in the event and in the process of evaluating what’s going on so that appropriate strategies can be adopted to deal with the situation.

The need to choose which form of resilience we adopt arises from events that are perceived as threatening our equilibrium, or survival.

The more threatening the event is perceived, the potential for losing mental control is greater, the more extreme is the response – either intense active resilience to keep mental control and overcome the event, or, potentially more damaging, passive resilience, likely to trigger a degree of strain or stress because mental control is unattainable.

Active resilience requires us to have flexible strength of mind. The mind needs to be strong and in control to overcome the initial emotional reaction to an event and be able to access strategies for overcoming the event. We need to be flexible as we rely on a range of strategies to be more than two, as a simple alternative way to overcome a difficult event is often not enough to achieve a positive outcome. We often need to be more imaginative about solutions.

Resilience is a choice depending on your answer to the ‘what’s in it for me?’ question

Choosing between passive and active resilience in a given challenging situation or event depends on our answer to a question about self-interest. Our basic and fundamental self-interest is to survive, and our behaviour will be guided by what we think is the best way to achieve this.
For those who are in a toxic and difficult environment, who consequently have little motivation to overcome a challenge, the choice is likely to be passive resilient, and to follow the pathway of least resistance – resistance being the strength of the threatening event preventing us from being in mental control.

Those who can ‘see’ the future and believe that overcoming the challenge will benefit self-interest will make the choice to be actively resilient.

We may start out using active resilience in the face of a challenging event, but along the way begin to realise our efforts are not enough to achieve a positive outcome, and will transfer to being passively resilient.

One of the most difficult challenges to deal with is the drip drip drip effect of an event that we keep on overcoming but the event keeps on repeating itself. Sooner or later, without a completely clean resolution of the event, the drip drip drip effect will wear us down to the point that we then choose to hibernate and effectively seek to ignore the event. However, the process of arriving at this result may be detrimental to our psychological health, depending on the effectiveness of the event on loosing our mental control.

**Tolerance**

Tolerance is a form of resilience where we accept the event or situation without being adversely affected by it. No action, either active or passive, needs taking as we merely absorb the situation.

This is a mental state not unlike passive resilience in that we seek not to become emotionally engaged with the event, form no judgment about it, and take little or no action in relation to the event.

Mindfulness is an approach to mental control that has similar characteristics to tolerance. Mindfulness is accepting the present moment without evaluation, judgment, reaction or action other than to absorb the moment, its sounds, textures, colours, smells and other sensations including emotions.

Tolerance, using Mindfulness to reinforce the discipline of not evaluating and forming judgments, is a way we can cope effectively with routine events that pose no great threat but lurk in the foothills of becoming threatening. It helps to prevent active or passive resilience from being invoked before the threat becomes potentially extremely stressful, when tolerance is no longer an option.

**Attitude**

Attitude is the stance we adopt in the face of an event.

Attitude informs the approach we take to overcome an event.

Events happen all the time. The brain doesn’t react and respond to almost all events except those that place us on alert because of their ‘proximity’ to our survival. Most events have been experienced before and where they pose no threat, we ‘ignore’ them and waste no resources in evaluating what they are. Therefore, there is little effort in evaluating the events and forming an attitude towards them because they don’t require us to be active. We tolerate them.

Attitudes come from somewhere! In general, they are formed from influences derived from multiple sources, experienced growing up and in adult life. These influences include a strong and conscious awareness of oneself, especially the identity we create for ourselves about who we are, and what kind of person we are.

Our attitude is influenced by how we think we can survive to the next millisecond. Depending on our state of psychological wellbeing we can take the long or the short view of how to survive. The short view will
arise when a threat is immediate, our psychological wellbeing is compromised and we need do anything to survive. The long view arises when we feel secure enough to establish a longer term strategy of how we intend to behave to secure our survival in the longer term. A shorter term strategy might be to be very assertive in a threatening situation, whilst a longer term strategy may be to be charming to everyone in our interactions, in the expectation they will reciprocate and be charming back, so we nullify the other person as a potential threat and can take them at face value in the future.

Our attitude is influenced by standards. These may be standards established by our parents, at school, by professional bodies, as well as the law and societal standards of the time.

Our attitude is influenced by our emotions. If emotions are not controlled they cause our behaviour. When we do control emotions we can reflect on what we felt and be influenced by them in forming our attitude about what we should do.

Our attitude is influenced by our capacity to be resilient. If we find ourselves in a situation where we cannot express our resilience by the behaviour we adopt, our attitude will reflect this, and at some time in the future when we can express our resilience our behaviour may be dramatic as a consequence of being restrained for some time.

These influences combined together in our evaluation of the event, and its context, and helps us determine whether or not it’s worth it to be actively resilient. It becomes a mental balancing act.

Motivation

Motivation is the marriage between us being open to being enticed to do something, and something enticing us to do it.

For us to be open to being enticed we have to have a curiosity about life that makes us interested in the world around us.

Motivation or lack of it helps determine the choice between active and passive resilience. If we adopt active resilience we will be enticed by the possible outcome of overcoming the extremely stressful event. This will often mean that the context of the extremely stressful event is one that entices our curiosity, sufficient for us to decide it is worth it to use our mental energy to overcome the event without experiencing personal stress.

A toxic working environment, for example, will not be sufficiently enticing for us to decide to be actively resilient against an extremely stressful event, as we may feel the leaders of the workplace have paid insufficient attention to the general needs of the workforce to have a positive working environment. So, why should we be bothered to make the extra effort to overcome difficult and challenging situations when we can adopt a passive resilient approach and effectively disengage from the working environment and concentrate on our personal survival.

Anticipation

Anticipation is a characteristic of being wise. If we can anticipate events, their consequences and how we respond to them we can prepare our strategies for action in advance of the extremely stressful event occurring. This makes us resilient.

Being able to interpret the context within which extremely stressful events may occur is a key feature in the process of being resilient. This helps us anticipate the probability of an event occurring and the strategies we need to overcome them.
In the workplace there are some simple signs and symbols that should place us on alert. For example, the remoteness of the Board of Directors from the senior executive team or senior management and the workforce. The adoption of cultural or corporate values that haven’t be derived from the workforce. The employment of managers who have no experience of dealing with uncertainty and people. These are clear signals that extremely stressful events will occur within the workplace.

Evaluation of an event

Whenever a perceived to be threatening event occurs we evaluate the event in its context, and against the influences on our attitude, and work out what to do.

Our immediate reaction is impulsive, emotional and very subjective. This influences how we feel about the event.

We may then try to control the impulsive emotional reaction and gather as much objective evidence that is available.

We will establish if we feel the event breaks our Psychological Contract or not. This is the covert contract we have with our employer based on a personal idea of our employer’s obligations towards us, and based on an idea of what is fair and reasonable.

As part of the assessment of a possible breach of the Psychological Contract we will think about whether the event is appropriate to the situation we are in, and whether or not the timeliness of the event is expected or not. If the event comes out of the blue we may find it harder to control our impulsive emotional reaction.

We may then start to work out what to do. We may start by exploring our previous experiences of a similar event to see if there is anything we did last time that can be applied this time.

This will help us work out our expectations of the outcome, and what to aim at in deciding to be either active or passive.

And finally, if we are part of a group of people experiencing the same event we will adopt the actions of the group, regardless of our own thoughts based on the evaluation.

Controlling emotions

Our impulsive emotional reaction to an extremely stressful event is almost impossible to avoid. The difficulty this creates is that emotions can easily take over our mental control, and we need to be in mental control to access strategies for dealing with the situation.

It is important, therefore, for actively resilient people to take control of their emotions in difficult situations.

Of course, all emotions shouldn’t be suppressed for long. At some stage after controlling emotions, they need to be allowed full expression.
Controlling your responses to yourself, chaotic situations and people

Resilience is normally required when extremely stress events occur. They occur within yourself when you don’t understand yourself completely and experience something that is directly personal. They occur in situations of chaos when you aren’t in control of the situation. And they occur with people and their behaviour in different situations.

Strengthening resilience, therefore, is about strengthening yourself, as well as providing techniques and strategies for dealing with chaotic situations and difficult people.

Know who you are

Strengthening personal resilience starts will knowing who you are.

This means spending time thinking about yourself – possibly about ten to twenty minutes per day.

There are so many factors that make us who we are, but, as an illustration, it is helpful for us to question ourselves about our attitude towards key aspects of ordinary life; our general level of motivation to do things, and the things we won’t do; to recall our experiences – especially those that were challenging and which we overcame effectively, and those when the opposite occurred, and why this happened; our skills, especially those we may have forgotten about because we don’t use them often, such as parenting skills when our children have grown up; our ability to interact effectively with people, in different situations with people who exhibit different temperaments; our relationships with people, and how important they are to us, as well as how strong; and how we feel about what we’ve achieved to date, whether we are satisfied or hungry for more.

Know what you stand for

Strengthening resilience also means knowing our boundaries, and knowing what we stand for. Knowing these things makes us determined to achieve what we want, and keeps us on the pathway to their achievement.

Personal values drive us; they make us do things that sometimes others find hard to understand. Personal values, also, influence our level of comfort in different situations and circumstances, and helps to place us on alert when we feel uncomfortable about something or someone’s behaviour.

Finding our what our personal values are is an important part of understanding who we are and what we stand for. It provides us with the self-knowledge that gives us confidence in deciding what to do in challenging situations.

Know where you’re going

Having a purpose in life, or several purposes, is central to our resilience, and psychological wellbeing. It’s important to be able to visualise your future and have an aim to achieve. This has the effect of giving you purpose as well as diminishing the intensity of extremely stressful events that don’t fit your pathway to the future. Such events don’t carry such intensive meaning if they fall outside your values and what you want to achieve in life.
Know how to keep calm

To be able to control impulsive emotional reactions to extremely stressful events, it is best to keep calm. This calmness provides you with mental control.

There are a number of ways of keeping calm, including using a mindfulness technique of listening to the sound of your breathing. Controlled breathing is central to being calm, and by regulating the speed of breathing you can remain calm in most situations.

Know how to make sense of chaos

A fair amount of chaos occurs because we lose control of time, or we don’t work out what is important for us to do during the day.

Regulating our time, and working out what is important in our daily routines helps us to gain control of time and the events to be completed within that time.

A simple approach to this is by working out how we spend our 168 hours per week. Once we know this we can adjust what we do, so we can do the important things to achieve our purposes in life.

Know how to solve problems

Problems are events that come in all shapes and sizes. There may be problems that are illogical; problems that occur because of incomplete information; problems that happen because we don’t pay attention.

If we like solving problems we’re likely to be curious about resolving and overcoming extremely stressful events. Solving problems requires us to call on a range of strategies. This is the same requirement for being actively resilient – to be able to call on more than two possible solutions to a problem.

A simple problem such as ‘what is the maximum number of pieces of cake you can get from four straight cuts of the cake?’ will encourage you to think outside the normal way of resolving the problem. If you don’t get the solution straight away it means you are barking up the wrong tree to begin with, and will need to think again.

Know how to talk to anyone about anything at any time

Being able to interact effectively with anyone about anything provides you with the confidence to deal with challenging behaviours.

One of the ways of doing this is to learn how to deliver the assertive message. The assertive message is one that can be applied to any situation, and is based on you saying to the other person something that indicates how valuable he or she is to you. Once you’ve told the other person how valuable they are to you personally, you can tell him or her how you feel, the reasons why you feel the way you do, and what you want to happen next.

You will discover this provides you with the confidence to deal with anyone. However, you have to practice the sequence. You must never connect the first part about the person being of value to you, to any of the following three parts, as this negates the authenticity of the first part.
Know who your important and strong relationships are

Relationships help you to be resilient. However, they have to be strong relationships based on trust. These are the relationships you take at face value, and will be ones that support you in times of extreme challenge.

Such relationships need to be important to you. This is relevant because you have to work at making them strong. You need to work out which relationships are important to your success and happiness, and work out how strong they actually are. If there are any doubts, you should ditch the unimportant relationships and strengthen the important ones.

Know how to strengthen your important relationships

One of the ways of strengthening relationships is to be frank and open about your mutual expectations. A way in which this is done is for you to have a conversation with your important relationship and set out your expectation of him or her. If this is agreed, you should then ask him or her what their expectations of you happen to be. If you agree to this, you have established mutual expectations, and each of you will work towards fulfilling them. This makes the relationship stronger, and provides you with greater confidence about where you stand with your relationship.

Conclusion

Active resilience requires you to be motivated enough to overcome extremely stressful situations without being stressed yourself.

This depends on each situation, and each situation is different.

Your attitude to a challenging event will be heavily influenced by the context, as well as your attitude, and whether it is in your interests to be resilient. Resilience is a choice. Events are invitations to respond. You don’t have to respond actively unless you think it is worth it.

There are several ways of strengthening your resilience.

In this paper the focus is on your response to yourself, chaotic situations and other people.
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Derek Mowbray is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist with a doctorate in leadership. With CEO experience in public, private and voluntary sectors, Derek has held various top leadership positions prior to turning his attention to helping organisations understand the link between psychological wellbeing and performance.

Derek specialises in the primary prevention of stress at work (a major inhibitor to performance) by focusing on elevating psychological wellbeing in the workforce. He emphasises the requirement for a positive working environment that provokes the workforce to feel well and perform at its peak, by reducing the challenging events and poor behaviours that may trigger stress in others.

With a special interest in organisation health psychology, which aims to harmonise the relationship between organisations and their workforce, Derek’s specialties are building organisation-wide positive work cultures, the performance related behaviour of leaders and managers in relation to their employees and strengthening mental resilience.

He is the originator of Psychological Responsibility, which places on the individual a responsibility for feeling psychologically well, as well as a responsibility to do no psychological harm to others. He is, also, a sponsor of the method of ‘sharing responsibility for the future success of the organisation’ as a principle underpinning organisational success and high achievement.

His work approaches and interventions are well recognised and adopted throughout the UK and internationally.

Derek’s mission is to create and sustain ‘the workplace as a fabulous, high performing place to work’. 
About MAS

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There are three interlocking features that prevent stress at work –

- Creating and sustaining a culture and environment where managers and workforce are fully engaged with the organisation and are *provoked into peak performance*.
- Leaders and managers exhibiting the behaviours that encourage commitment, trust and engagement which will *provoke peak performance in others*.
- Building and sustaining personal resilience against challenging situations which will *provoke peak performance in individuals*.

Our purpose is to help organisations achieve peak performance and productivity; to strengthen corporate and personal resilience and to prevent stress from occurring in the first place.

Our approach is to help organisations establish psychologically healthy workplaces by facilitating the implementation of our WellBeing and Performance Agenda framework.

We provide a range of help and services for organisations:

- We undertake *organisational health and cultural assessments* that include an assessment of leadership and management styles and approaches.
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- We provide a range of programmes introducing a broad range of topics within the WellBeing and Performance Agenda, all designed to help leaders, managers and the workforce bring about change.
- We act as a ‘critical friend’ to internal champions or ambassadors for wellbeing and performance, providing individualised support as needed.

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- **in house programmes for all:**
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- Tips for Taking Psychological Responsibility
- Tips for Creating a Culture of Sharing Responsibility for the Future Success of the Organisation

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