



Resilience: The Bounce that Counts

by JUDY BERANGER

Psychiatrist Scott Peck in his classic, best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*, maintained that life was hard and that courage was the product of facing and working through whatever challenges life brings your way. It is my conviction that the development of a resilient self is the key to such courage and healthy self-esteem. To grow resilience is something we can choose to spend effort on developing, with the likely result of improving the quality of our relationships and our life. Learning how to hone our reframing abilities, to be proud instead of ashamed, to work through our biases, judgements and filters, and to embrace every moment of this precious life while loving with passion are goals that can assist in developing the best we can be. Growing our potential and heightening our abilities to be creative, to give respect, care, patience and consideration, particularly in times of diversity and when we do not feel respected, are resilient skills often quoted in the resilience literature.

Resilience Defined

Most definitions of “resilience” refer to our ability to “bounce back”. The American Psychological Association says: *Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, stress, threats, trauma and tragedy*. It can be complex, as life can change in a heartbeat. Unexpected health issues, general issues that trigger loss, the ending of relationships, death and loss of precious ones, any despairing or traumatic events unexpected and unwanted, can all create that curve in our lives. Even worse, it can bang the door shut to that which we may have previously taken for granted. Action, attitude, effort, perseverance, energy and commitment to insight and initiative will speed up the bounce back. The literature agrees that resilience can be learned, developed and cultivated by anyone who is willing to commit to self-care, maintain a flexible, optimistic attitude and keep life balance. Some say it is an art and many describe resilient people as having been “bent but not broken”. Psychologist George Vaillant says a resilient

person resembles “a twig with a fresh, green living core. When twisted out of shape, such a twig bends, but it does not break; instead, it springs back and continues growing.” It does not mean we do not suffer; it just means we will find ways to crawl, and maybe bounce back into a different life, say good-bye to what was, and come to accept a new way of being.

We are also learning more on resilience from one of the world’s longest running studies on living a long, fulfilling and happy life. The 75-year long *Harvard Study of Adult Development* research demonstrated that one of the best predictors of longevity is determined by the lifestyle choices we make in midlife. Not surprisingly, the study found that older adults with a positive outlook, process emotional information differently from those with more negative views. Resilience is apparent in the emerging findings. The power of social connections was one of the most significant outcomes with emphasis not on the number of “friends”, but rather on the depth of true, quality friendships. What is important are close relationships that matter, whether biological or otherwise, people we trust with our nearest and dearest intimacies, people who are consistently loyal. They have our back, even when we don’t agree with each other. It is those strong relationships that the study found protects our bodies but equally safeguards our brains. The study also reported that family feuds resulting in long-term grudges take a terrible toll. Like much of the resilience literature this study upholds that “the good life” is built with good relationships – there is no other way. Resilience is strengthened when we have caring, trusting, loving and supportive relationships within and outside the family.

Resilient People

The research abounds with ideas of how to grow resilience and often refers to our perceptions and misunderstandings. Resilient people try to check things out and stay away from assumptions. How often do we proceed in our interactions, passing on second hand information? Whole cultures use stories that may have

originated from misinformation. The myth of ostriches burying their heads in the sand, for example, has been used so much that there are some who believe this inaccuracy. Ostriches do dig holes to lay their eggs but never to bury their heads! Passing on misinformation, especially when it could be damaging, can cause considerable pain and anxiety to people who are on the receiving end. At a recent workshop a teacher shared an example of a lady meeting her visiting cousin and giving him a huge hug before going into the restaurant. A passerby noticed the interaction and by evening there was gossip in the small town that she was cheating on her partner.

Resilient people have wounds and suffer like everyone else but the difference is they continue to move to higher ground as they heal. They struggle, but keep breathing and functioning anyway. Resilience does not ensure freedom from trauma, diseases and general misery but it does ensure more focused action and better lived days. Confucius said: *Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.*

Resilient people are strong examples of modelling gratitude. A teacher told me a story about her neighbor's friend. The friend's adult daughter had been living with her parents, rent free, since she started a good job five years earlier. Her parents decided to charge a little rent along with expecting her to help out with house cleaning. The daughter was incensed and told her friends and colleagues that her parents were uncaring and mean! On hearing this, two of her colleagues challenged her as they too, were living with parents and were proud they were paying rent. Clearly the ungrateful daughter had not yet learned that practicing daily gratitude is a resilience skill. Teachers tend to be great models to students for demonstrating the gratitude skill and the research suggests that gratitude is a protective factor that supports teacher resilience.

In his research, psychiatrist Steven Wolin found in some workplaces there are those who concentrate on being a victim by encouraging a focus on illness or life traumas rather than on building a capacity for strength. Presenting as a victim by drawing attention to self, to illness, to blaming others can reduce any commitment to move towards resilience. The victim's typical stance – "...expecting me to act resilient means you don't appreciate how much I have been through" – ensures that no bounce back is likely to follow. At times like this, resilient models can be quite helpful. Author Hara Estroff Marano says we are complex enough psychologically to be hurt and resilient at the same time. It is not unusual to hear examples from teachers who wish they had more

preparation time, less demands and more resources, who see students who lack motivation and respect, but despite it all, these same teachers can show empathy and compassion at every turn. They demonstrate a strong sense of self efficacy, knowing and believing they can determine what happens in their sphere of influence. They are resilient and know the value of their contributions and the power of modelling to their students.

Another finding in the resilience research is that some who had felt unloved, devalued and unappreciated as children reported becoming resilient by modelling a trusted adult(s). Teachers were often cited as the most helpful and inspiring models. As those children became adults they reported that their partners and spouses also were influential role models. They felt valued, could trust, could grieve and thus moved beyond the pain of knowing they lost so much in the younger years. They were now more able to feel and act optimistically and embrace their adult years.

Coping Strategies

In their book, *Resilience*, physicians Southwick and Charney outline their findings regarding the coping strategies exhibited by resilient people to deal with stress and trauma. These included:

- confronting their fears;
- maintaining an optimistic, realistic outlook;
- seeking and accepting social support;
- imitating positive role models;
- relying upon their own inner moral compass;
- turning to spiritual practices and finding ways to accept that which they could not change;
- attending to their health and well-being;
- training intensively to stay physically fit, mentally sharp, and emotionally strong;
- looking for meaning and opportunity during adversity and sometimes even finding humor in the darkness;
- wholeheartedly accepting responsibility for their own emotional well-being.

Consider developing a list of actions that might further enhance your own resilience. When did you exhibit strength and perseverance in the past during challenging times? What helped keep you strong? Who are the most influential resilience models for you? Replicate. Who can you depend on? Thank them!

EAP can connect you with a variety of resources that can support your efforts to remain resilient.

.....
Judy Beranger is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Judy (ext. 265), jmberanger@nlta.nl.ca or Gail Carroll (ext. 242), gmcarroll@nlta.nl.ca.

“...one of the best predictors of longevity is determined by the lifestyle choices we make in midlife.”