



RESILIENCE

Text by Dr Lee Yik Voon

When I chanced upon the word “resilience” a couple of months back, it set me thinking about how important resilience is to us today more than ever before.

Resilience refers to how rapidly a person recovers from life’s tragic events or setbacks; those with resilience seem to recover quicker, while others find it difficult to get out of a rut and are unable to move forward.

It is not that those who are resilient do not feel the intensity or the impact of the trauma, but rather that they have within themselves better coping mechanisms that help them recover faster.

Factors

There are various factors that determine how resilient we are or can be.

First and foremost, to build up resilience, one needs to be willing to do so. Good family support builds one’s resilience, as well as having a good network of friends. I might say at this point that we are not talking about Facebook friends. We all know that in our lifetime, we will only have just a handful of close buddies who will stick with us through thick and thin.

When you are in a positive relationship, be it with family or friends, reassurance and encouragement increases your ability to rebound more quickly after a difficult event or

problem. Strong social networks appear to be a cornerstone for resilience.

Despite previous warnings to the contrary, engagement in social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, can build up children’s resilience with beneficial impact on their mental well-being. Moderate internet use can also help children to develop their social skills and allow them greater access to help when needed.

In addition to those mentioned above, there are other factors that can help improve resilience:

- Having a positive view of your self-image, confidence in your strengths and abilities, self-knowledge and awareness.
- Possessing the ability to regularly make realistic plans and successfully execute them.
- Managing your emotions, feelings and impulses in an effective and healthy manner.
- Developing good communication and problem-solving skills.

Role models

Here, I would like to mention several examples of fellow colleagues from our medical fraternity who have demonstrated admirable resilience.

A senior doctor who had spinal surgery with resulting gait problems persisted, despite his disability, to work as a GP, continued to teach students in family medicine and even dedicated time to chair Singapore Medical Council (SMC) Disciplinary Tribunals.

There was a medical student who fell into financial difficulties when his father passed away suddenly. He strove and worked hard to graduate, and is now a well-known doctor in the private sector, specialising in public health and working part-time as a GP.

We have many doctors who spend years doing missionary work in foreign lands. One such doctor’s son developed a childhood tumour, and yet he persevered on as a local physician in the foreign land, and continued to mentor young doctors and volunteer his time in public service, including serving in the SMC.

There is also a doctor who took and passed her specialist examinations three days after she delivered her baby. What’s more – she achieved all this while she continued to work full-time during her pregnancy.

A professor in geriatrics in a restructured hospital suffered from an acoustic neuroma. But he continued to teach his students until the very day before his scheduled surgery.

Another doctor, who is also a marathoner, persisted in his marathon training despite sustaining multiple injuries, and even went through the rigorous orthopaedic residency at the same time.

We have an infectious disease (ID) physician among us who survived SARS and continues to work as an ID physician until today.

Recently, one of our alumni came out of retirement and became the world's oldest prime minister.

Ways to build better resilience

After reviewing a few articles on this topic, I gather below some ways that can help us build better and stronger resilience as individuals.

Do bear in mind that just as how you would enhance the skills that you possess, the process of building better resilience takes time, effort, commitment, focus, patience and training.

It is a long-drawn process that you need to keep working on as it takes years to learn and master. Some people may find it a little unsettling, but seeing a therapist, psychologist or life coach could benefit you in your journey.

We also need to note that one's culture could have an impact on how one communicates feelings and deals with adverse events. However, with growing cultural diversity, we now have access to a greater number of approaches to building resilience.

Resilience reserves

In a British study, it was found that people draw down on their resilience reserve not because of tragedies like a natural disaster, mistakes in business, a changing business environment, or an economy downturn. Instead, the biggest drain on resilience reserves was managing difficult people and politics at work. This was followed closely by stress due to overwork and personal criticism.

90% of the respondents in this study said that they derive resilience from within themselves, while over 50% said

it was their relationships with others that replenish their resilience reserves. Only 10% said that they derive it from within their organisations.

Recovering from setbacks

So, how does one, especially those in leadership positions, bounce back from a setback? Some recommendations included:

Leaders who encounter problems when they operate in a new organisation need to recognise that the leadership style that they have been comfortable with for many years may no longer work. These leaders have to accept that they have failed in the new role and not blame external forces. They may also need to thoroughly analyse and adopt a new style of leadership, as well as make decisive actions to implement it.

For some leaders, a more aggressive approach may be necessary to rebound from career fiascos. Some experts have suggested a five-step action plan: decide on how to retaliate; enlist friends to provide help and support as they try to land another job; know how to effectively criticise the people who have let them go; buckle up and try again; and finally, find a new mission in life that rejuvenates their passion and creates meaning and significance.

Yet another way is to create an environment in which both setbacks and successes are treated as positive learning experiences. Leaders could openly admit their mistakes and avoid giving out either praise or blame, but instead take a non-judgemental and analytical position as they interact with their staff.

Summary

Resilient people and organisations possess three characteristics – a staunch belief in accepting reality; strong values that support the notion that life is meaningful, and a prowess to improvise. Possessing at least one of these qualities will help you tackle life's curveballs, but you will likely be more successful in developing resilience when you have all three.

Looking at so many examples of our fraternity displaying great resilience, I urge all medical doctors in Singapore to join SMA where you can form a strong network to safeguard the resilience of medical doctors. We need to do this to develop good resilience, and come up with the best solutions to proficiently face all upcoming challenges. ♦

References

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Dr Lee is a GP practising in Macpherson. He is also a member of the current National General Practitioner Advisory Panel. He is a pet lover at heart who is the proud owner of a dog, and regularly feeds neighbourhood community cats. He also enjoys playing online war games and thinks that playing Pokemon Go is a good form of exercise.

