

Resilience Part 1

“About four years ago in Syria, Wafaa (last name not included to protect her family security) fell into despair, when her husband was arrested. He has not been seen or heard from since. Just a few months before that, her sixteen year old son was killed while playing soccer outside their apartment. Wafaa couldn’t bear the pain and considered taking her own life, but she was pregnant with their sixth child and that stopped her. She and her brother fled to Istanbul with her two youngest children, while her three older children stayed behind in Syria. Not long after she received a call from her daughter, who had a son of her own. He had just been killed by a sniper a week before his second birthday. Beyond imaginable. Unfathomable.” (Sandberg and Grant p104)

Although one of many millions of refugees around the world today, who suffer and have to cope with loss upon loss: loss of loved ones, home, country and all that is familiar Sheryl Sandberg was so struck by Wafaa’s incredible resilience, that she got in touch to learn more about her struggles. She spoke through an interpreter about how she had coped, “When my son was murdered, I thought I would die, being a mother saved me. I need to smile for my other children.”

When Wafaa arrived in Turkey, she spent most days alone with her children while her brother tried to find work. She did not speak the language and knew almost no one, and felt overwhelmingly lonely. Then she found a community centre for Syrians and met other women who were also struggling. Little by little Wafaa found moments of joy. “Praying makes me happy,” she said. “My relationship with God is stronger. I understand Him more and I know he will keep giving me strength.”

Wafaa also finds comfort in cooking meals for family and friends. The activity and creativity helps to keep her from “thinking too much”, it gives her a focus and allows her to create “home” where ever she is with the familiar smells of the spices and the Syrian recipes. When one of Wafaa’s neighbours in Istanbul became sick, Wafaa cooked all her meals for a week. It made her happy to be able to help, especially with Syrian food, the only thing she had to give. Caring for her children and others is a source of joy for Wafaa, she says “When my children smile, I feel happiness. I feel that I am still here for a reason. I will be healed through healing them.”

Although an extreme example, Wafaa’s heart rending story highlights both the traumas and adversities that would test anyone’s resilience and some of the ways, that amidst all her troubles, she was able to move from overwhelming despair to recovering joy and hope for the future.

What is resilience? Are we born with it? Can we learn to be resilient? What can we do to develop it in ourselves and others that we are responsible for? We will look at these questions and try to find some answers, although there is still a lot of debate around the issues raised and more research is probably needed. A criticism that occurs in the literature is that the word “resilience” is used too widely and too vaguely and that causes confusion. Thus the definitions vary according to the disciplines appropriating the term.

Definitions

I think that the original use of the term resilience was in engineering and material science and referred to structures and materials hence:-

The power and ability to rebound and resume the original shape, size and position after being bent, stretched and compressed. Elasticity; buoyancy; recuperative powers.

Psychological resilience – the ability to successfully cope with a crisis and to return to pre-crisis status quickly. A “positive adaptation” after a stressful or adverse situation.

Resilience in older people can be defined as the ability to bounce back and to recover physical and psychological health in the face of adversity.

Resilience is the process of adapting in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or a significant source of stress, such as family or relational problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. Being resilient does not mean that a person does not experience difficulty or distress.

It is important to note that resilience is not only about overcoming a deeply stressful situation, but coming out of it with “competent functioning”. Resilience allows a person to rebound from adversity as a strengthened and more resourceful person.

Nature or Nurture?

Emmy Werner was one of the early scientists to use the term *resilience* in the 1970s. She studied a cohort of children in Kauai, Hawaii. Many of the children grew up in poverty with parents that were alcoholics or mentally ill and many of the parents were unemployed. Werner noted that, of the children that grew up in these detrimental situations, two thirds exhibited destructive behaviours, learning and behavioural problems early on, then in their late teens, chronic unemployment, substance abuse, teenage pregnancies and delinquency. However one third of these youngsters did not exhibit destructive behaviours but rather developed into “competent, confident, and caring young adults.” They attained academic, domestic, and social success - they were always ready to capitalise on the new opportunities that arose. Werner called the latter group ‘resilient’.

What was it that set these resilient children apart? After following the children over three decades she discovered several elements that predicted resilience. A significant influence was if a child had a strong bond with a supportive care-giver, parent, teacher, or other mentor like figure. But another set of predictors were psychological and had to do with how the children responded to the environment. From a young age, resilient children tended to “meet the world on their own terms, they were autonomous and independent, and would seek out new experiences, and had a positive social orientation. They were not especially gifted but used whatever skills they had effectively.” Werner assessed that they had what psychologists call an “internal locus of control” that is they believed that they, not their circumstances, affected their achievements. They saw themselves as orchestrators of their own fates.

The children studied in the research above experienced what might be called chronic environmental threats or adversity e.g. low socio-economic status, challenging home conditions etc. Chronic threats may include threats such as parents with psychological or other problems; exposure to violence or poor treatment or being a child of a problematic divorce. Other threats may be described as acute: witnessing or experiencing a traumatic or violent incident or being in an accident. The difference is the intensity and duration of the stressor. In the case of acute stressors the intensity is usually high, whereas the stress resulting from chronic adversity might be low, but its impact might be repeated and cumulative on resources and adaptation since it lasts for much longer.

The significance of this was seen by Werner in that even the most resilient children became overwhelmed and their resilience evaporated, when exposed to multiple stressors, especially if these occurred at vulnerable points in life. In other words most people have a breaking point.

She also made the observation that some people who had not demonstrated resilience when they were young somehow learned the skills of resilience and were able to overcome adversity in later life and to flourish. This then raises the question of how resilience might be learned. (Research from a paper by Maria Konnicova)

Resilience is high on the agenda in education these days and is certainly a quality that schools seek to build into their students. The following are the Seven characteristics of a resilient child according to Whitby School's web site:-

1. **Competence** – this requires giving them the opportunity to master a skill or to complete a challenge, thus giving them confidence that they can meet new and harder challenges.
2. **Confidence** – confidence increases with feelings of hope, efficiency, optimism, and resilience. Confidence helps them to take on new tasks, to make new friends and to take risks. Confident children don't give up when they fail; they try again. They need to be praised for their efforts not for their intelligence.
3. **Connected** – to the people around them. This gives them a sense of being protected with a network of those who are there for them. They need encouragement and praise, especially when they fail or are not good at something.
4. **Character** – children have a built in sense of right and wrong, but need that sense to become a moral compass, which requires guidance, correction and standards to be set. This gives them confidence that they know how to act in different situations.
5. **Contributors** – they need to know that their actions make a difference. Teachers and parents could ask them how and why their contribution mattered and how their contribution could be improved.
6. **Cope** – children may appear confident to cope until something does not go according to the plan, then they fall apart. A truly resilient child is one who is able to manage their emotions when faced with adversity (so that they can keep working towards their goal). Resilient children face their feelings about the situation and contain any disappointment, frustration or anger. Then they start thinking about the challenge not as a dead end but as a stumbling block to overcome.

7. **Control** – a child’s environment is the final factor that has a big impact in how confident they feel. When children have consistent care-givers, a predictable routine and clear boundaries from the adults in their lives, they feel less stress and more connected to the people around them. This helps them to cope with the challenges that arise.

This school obviously is aware of the challenges and struggles that their students face and are committed to helping them to learn resilience in overcoming them in order to reach their potential. Many of the characteristics they refer to are equally important for resilient adults as for children.

You may well be thinking, how does looking at resilience in children and young people help those of us who are in the second half of life? The answer is that being aware of the risks and vulnerabilities that we might face as individuals, then recognising that we are capable of growing and learning to become more resilient, will help us as we encounter the challenges and adversity that life will bring. In other words, that we are better equipped to finish well.

There appear to be three main contexts that promote resilience or protect from the risks of adversity:-

1. The individual – personal attributes, disposition, perceptions and responses.
2. The family – having close bonds with a family member or supportive person.
3. The community - receiving strong social support and peer relationships.

What can help us to grow in resilience as an individual:-

Perceptions

George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist, found that a central element of resilience was whether we conceptualise an event as traumatic, or as an opportunity to learn and grow. In other words it is not the event itself but how we process it. Other research has shown that resilience negatively correlated when the world is viewed as threatening, problematic and distressing and oneself as vulnerable within it. Conversely resilience is positively correlated when the world is engaged and confronted with a positive attitude, confident of success and a sense of self directedness. Does this mean that all optimists are resilient and pessimists are not? I hope not, but it might mean that we need to be aware of how we explain and construe events to ourselves.

“We plant the seeds of resilience in the way we process negative events. After spending decades studying people deal with setbacks, psychologist Martin Seligman found that three P’s can stunt recovery; (1) Personalisation – the belief that we are at fault; (2) Pervasiveness – the belief that an event will affect all areas of our life; and (3) Permanence – the belief that the aftershocks will last for ever.....The loop in your head repeats, “It’s my fault this is awful. My whole life is awful. And it’s always going to be awful.””

(Sandberg and Grant p16)

Seligman found that training people to change their explanatory styles from internal to external “Bad events are not my fault”, from global to specific “This is one narrow thing

rather than a massive indication that something is wrong with my life”, and from permanent to impermanent “I can change the situation rather than assuming it’s fixed” made them more psychologically successful and less likely to depression.

Bonanno again would conclude that we can exaggerate stressors in our own mind by repeatedly worrying and ruminating over minor things so that they feel like the biggest thing that ever happened. “Frame adversity as a challenge, and you become more flexible and able to deal with it, move on and learn from it, and grow. Focus on it, frame it as a threat, and a potentially traumatic event becomes an enduring problem; you become more inflexible, and more likely to be negatively affected.”

Managing our emotions

When people are faced with an adverse condition, there are three ways in which they may approach the situation-

1. Erupt with anger
2. Implode with overwhelming negative emotions, go numb and become unable to react
3. Simply become upset about the disruptive change

Research would say that only the third approach promotes well-being and that it is employed by resilient people, who become upset about the disruptive state and thus adapt themselves to be able to cope with the issue. But that the other two approaches lead people to adopt a victim role, blame others and reject any coping methods. They are instinctively reacting, rather than responding to a situation. Those who choose to respond to adverse conditions tend to cope, spring back and halt the crisis. Whereas those who react with negative emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, distress, helplessness and hopelessness decrease their ability to solve the problems they face and weaken their resilience. Constant fear and anxiety may also weaken the person’s immune system causing them to be more vulnerable to illnesses.

Studies show that maintaining positive emotions while facing adversity promotes flexibility in thinking and problem solving. In addition, positive emotions help an individual to recover from stressful experiences and events, improve the immune system, promotes faster recovery rates from injury and lower readmission rates to hospital for the elderly.

Gordon MacDonald in his book *A Resilient Life* says that a resilient person must learn to discipline their emotions:-

“Resilient people discipline their emotions and make sure that they accurately reflect reality. They can be sad, joyful, angry or elated in appropriate ways at appropriate times. Resilient people see their feelings as a significant part of the wholeness of life, but they do not allow them to be the final arbiter of conviction and choice.”

Acceptance

Sometimes accepting life as it is, what we have been offered, the circumstances that we find ourselves in, can seem an insurmountable hurdle. We can spend so much time and

emotional energy trying to rewrite the script. Perhaps the hardest things are those that are so permanent, the loss of loved ones, the chronic disability or terminal illness diagnosis. It may be mistakes or failures of ours or of others that have a permanent impact on our life or the life of a loved one. Acceptance does not mean merely tolerating life through gritted teeth or giving up and admitting defeat but acknowledging the present reality and seeking to move forward.

“As we go through life, we encounter all sorts of obstacles, difficulties, and challenges, and each time this happens we have a choice: we can embrace the situation as an opportunity to grow, learn, and develop, or we can fight, struggle, and try whatever we can to avoid it. A stressful job, a physical illness, a failed relationship: all these are opportunities to grow as a person, to develop new and better skills for dealing with life’s problems. As Winston Churchill put it: “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”” (Russ Harris p249)

Gratitude

When Sheryl Sandberg’s husband, Dave, died suddenly of a heart attack at 46 years old, she was left with two small children. In her moving story, she tells of how after several months she was still overwhelmed with grief and despair. Adam Grant, the psychologist who helped her to write her book, suggested that she should think of how much worse the situation could have been. For instance, her husband could have been driving the family car and the children could have been killed as well. She says “I instantly felt overwhelmingly grateful that my children were alive and healthy – and that gratitude overtook some of the grief.... Acknowledging our blessings can be a blessing in and of itself.” (Sandberg and Grant p25)

Psychologists asked a group of people to make a weekly list of five things for which they were grateful. Another group wrote about hassles and another group listed ordinary events. Nine weeks later the gratitude group felt significantly happier and reported fewer health problems. Counting blessings can actually increase happiness and health by reminding us of the good things in life. No matter how we might feel, we can always find something to be grateful for.

Gordon MacDonald sees gratitude as a primary mark of resilient people “....as they look into their pasts. They seek for things that call for gratitude. They give thanks to people who have made a difference in their lives. Thanks to God for benefits and blessings that they discover are numberless. Thanks in general that one receives the gift of life and thought and beauty and a thousand other things.” (MacDonald p132)

Grit

Dr Angela Duckworth used to be a teacher working in education, but she became frustrated and confused when she realised that high I.Q.s and talent in students did not guarantee success and high scores in exams. She left teaching to study psychology and to ask the questions - who is successful and why? Who stays the course or who drops out?

After looking at many settings including education, the military and business, she found one characteristic emerged in every one, which was what she called “grit”. She describes grit as

passion, perseverance, stamina and sticking with your future goals for years and not giving up. She says that people with grit live life as a marathon not a sprint. In the school context she found that the vital ingredient for success and continued motivation was grit, not I.Q. nor natural talent. Duckworth suggests that a key to building grit is what educationalists call a “growth mind set”. Another important factor is that those with grit don’t believe that failure is final.

“Grit refers to the perseverance and passion for long term goals. This is characterised as working persistently towards challenges, maintained effort and interest over years despite negative feedback, adversity, plateaus in progress or failure.....Grit may also influence an individual’s perception of a tasks difficulty. Grit was also seen as a positive predictor of psychological health and well-being, since it gave the individuals who possessed it self-control and a focus on future goals. Grit encourages people to create and sustain life goals, which give meaning and purpose to their life.” (Source unknown)

Perhaps a more scriptural version of grit might be contained in the words endurance and perseverance:-

Endurance = to bear up courageously and patiently under suffering, hardship and affliction.

Perseverance = to attend constantly, to continue unswervingly, to adhere firmly, to hold fast, to give unremitting care to.....

It is interesting that in Romans 5:3-4 perseverance is produced in the cauldron of suffering and itself produces the character (grit) that allows us to keep going in adversity.

“but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character,”

Failure is not final

Children’s resilience is shaped by the belief that they can learn from failure. Carol Dweck is a psychologist who demonstrated that children respond better to adversity when they have a growth mind set instead of a fixed one. A fixed mind set sees abilities as something that you are born with or not. When children have a growth mind set, they see abilities as skills that can be learned or developed. If they are not naturally good at something they can work to improve rather than give up. Whether children develop a growth or fixed mind set depends partly on the type of praise that they receive from parents and teachers. Growth and confidence comes from being praised for the effort put in to the task not just for being bright or successful. If children are taught to “normalise struggle” and to see failure as an opportunity to learn rather than an embarrassment to avoid, then they are more likely to take on challenges.

The problem comes when we are adults “To be resilient after failures, we have to learn from them. Most of the time we know this; we just don’t do it. We’re too insecure to admit mistakes to ourselves and too proud to admit them to others. Instead of opening up we get defensive and shut down.” (Sandberg and Grant p144)

She explains that most of us move in cultures, especially at work, where success is showcased not mistakes or failures. Yet where it is safe to talk about mistakes, people are more likely to report errors and less likely to make them. To be resilient we need a culture that sees failure as a learning opportunity.

“You can never know in advance whether you will achieve your goals; all you can do is keep moving forward in a valued direction. The future is not in your control. What is in your control is your ability to continue your journey, step by step, learning as you progress – and getting back on track whenever you wander. In the words of the great leader, Sir Winston Churchill: “Success is not final. Failure is not final. It is the courage to continue that counts.”” (Harris p245)

Don’t just bounce back, “bounce forward”

“A traumatic experience is a seismic event that shakes our belief in a just world, robbing us of the sense that life is controllable, predictable and meaningful... Victor Frankl the Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist said “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”” (Sandberg and Grant p77)

Psychologists and professors Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun studied hundreds of people, who had experienced serious trauma as a result of many different situations e.g. serious illnesses, accidents, natural disasters, refugees, prisoners of war, various kinds of assaults and abuse. They found two outcomes that they had expected - some people struggled with PTSD with anxiety, depression and difficulty functioning. While others were resilient: they bounced back to their state before the trauma. Now there was a third possibility: people who suffered trauma could *bounce forward*.

This research is described in Sandberg and Grant’s book and they go on to outline how Joe Kasper, a physician, who’s teenage son died of a rare disease and left him overwhelmed with a tsunami of grief and loss, applied himself to learning how it was possible to come back from his terrible pain and not to allow it to pull him under. Joe learned that there was such a thing as post traumatic growth and that it took five different forms:-

1. *Finding personal strength* – Just by surviving, gaining strength by living through it and not giving up. Also gaining perspective. The little things don’t seem so stressful anymore. Another aid to this can be daily journaling, honestly expressing feelings and seeking to record “three wins” each day i.e. three things that one has been able to do well, even if it is just getting up, getting dressed and making breakfast!
2. *Gaining appreciation* – there is a quote “He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how’”. There is an irony that some people come out of tragedy feeling more grateful, since it causes them, perhaps for the first time, to appreciate all that they have, family, friends and simply being alive. Many individuals or families, who have experienced irretrievable loss, devote themselves and their energies to establishing charities, raising money, making the public aware of the issues, all with the aim to give meaning and purpose to their aching loss and to help others not to have to face the same thing.

3. *Forming deeper relationships* – tragedy can motivate people to develop new and deeper relationships but this is not always the case, since some people lose their trust in others, some are so deeply angry that they argue constantly and current relationships break down. But those who suffer with others over long periods of time e.g. war comrades, cancer survivors may feel greater intimacy than with family and friends. When people endure tragedies together it can fortify the bonds between them.

UNESCAP funded research on how communities show resilience in the wake of natural disasters. They found that physically they were more resilient if they banded together pooling resources social, natural and economic. They found that they were not only more resilient at the time but that they also recovered much faster.

4. *Finding greater meaning in life* – a stronger sense of purpose rooted in a belief that one's existence has significance. Remember Wafaa finding meaning in cooking for others and working for her children's healing. Many people find meaning in their work especially when they are able to work in line with their values. This is an area in which those who have faith or discover faith through their suffering are observed to be resilient and to demonstrate post-traumatic growth. It reminds us that we are not the centre of the universe, that there is order and purpose, and that our suffering is neither random nor meaningless. A Christian lady diagnosed with cancer wrote "There have been times when I have been angry with God – how can he let this happen? But it's not about praying to God to fix everything. He is not a magic genie where you can ask for certain things and only the good things pop out. Even when you are in the darkest hours you can stay hopeful. That's the thing about faith...it helps to know that sooner or later this too will pass."
5. *Seeing new possibilities* – trauma often makes it harder to pursue new possibilities due to loss of work and loss of income. Whether the trauma is as a result of bereavement, serious illness or divorce it can, not only "rip away our present; it also tears apart our hopes for the future and shatters our dreams..." As well as income and employment problems there may be shifts in self-perception and risk of depression as we reassess who we hoped to become. But the loss of one possible 'self' after tragedy can set us free to imagine a new possible 'self'. "After undergoing hardship, people have new knowledge to offer those who go through similar experiences. It is a unique form of meaning, because it does not just give our lives purpose – it gives our *suffering* purpose. People help where they have been hurt so that their wounds are not in vain." (Sandberg and Grant p92)

Living according to our values

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived years of unspeakable horror in Auschwitz and other camps. He described his experiences in his book "Man's search for meaning". He recorded that contrary to what you would expect, the people who survived longest in the death camps were often not the physically fittest or strongest, but rather, those who were most connected with a purpose in life. If prisoners could connect with something that they really valued, that connection gave them something to live for,

something that made it worthwhile to endure all that suffering. Those who could not connect with a deeper value soon lost the will to live.

Frankl's own sense of purpose came from several sources for example, he deeply valued his loving relationship with his wife. Even in the strenuous work, agonising frostbite and brutal beatings he had to endure, that sense of love was enough to keep him going. Another of Frankl's values lay in helping others. He consistently helped other prisoners to cope with their sufferings by compassionately listening to them, by offering kindness and inspiration. He tended to the sick and dying. He also tried to help them to connect with their own deepest values so that they could find a sense of meaning and purpose, and thus gave them the strength to survive. (The story is quoted in Harris p188)

We can think of many biblical examples of those who suffered because they lived by their values; yet the very strength of their values gave them courage, meaning and purpose to survive very difficult situations:-

Daniel who refused to compromise and to give up praying to God in an alien culture.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who risked a horrific death because they were unwilling to serve other gods.

Joseph who unjustly went to prison because he refused to sin against God in response to Potiphar's wife.

Hope

Hope is a vital ingredient of resilience. The ability to have hope and to plan for the future is recognised as a sign of resilience in the elderly and those recovering from illness. Hope prevents us from giving in to despair, it helps us to see new possibilities and to seek a way forward. Shared hope can be even stronger than individual hope and increase our resilience.

"Resilience is not just built in individuals.....When we build resilience together, we become stronger ourselves and form communities that can overcome obstacles and prevent adversity. Collective resilience requires more than shared hope – it is also fuelled by shared experiences, shared narratives and shared power." (Sandberg and Grant p130)

Hope, both individual and communal, is a major theme of the letter to the Hebrews:-

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Self-care

This is a subject that we will return to in part 2 when looking at resilience in faith and finishing well. These are just a few pointers:-

Serving others – Perhaps counter-intuitively healing our own emotional pain can often begin by serving the needs of others. “We must be purposefully kind and generous, or we miss the best part of existence. The heart that goes out of itself gets large and full of joy. This is the great secret of the inner life. We do ourselves the most good by doing something for others.” (Horace Mann quoted by Swenson p88) Indeed research into the health of the elderly has shown that the ability to look beyond oneself and to care for the needs of others is a good marker for resilience.

Rest – being with people and serving them is great, but we also need to be sure to get away from people at times to rest to be quiet and to restore our physical, emotional and spiritual reserves, if we are to be resilient. (See previous notes on rest)

Sleep – Sheryl Sandberg writes about the importance of sleep in coping with the loss of her husband “I realised that sleep would be important to help us get through this. When we are tired we are physically and mentally weaker, more likely to be irritable, and we literally lack the energy to feel joy. Sleep matters even more in adversity because we need to marshal all our strength.” (p121)

Diet and exercise – Gordon MacDonald writes of the need to look after our bodies in order to be resilient “People who aspire to resilience take these things seriously. They understand that if they care for their bodies, they have taken a positive step towards a longer and healthier life. It is good common sense, and fulfils the law of stewardship: what God gives we take care of.” (p164)

Swenson also speaks to the fact that we function better when we appreciate what we have been given by God. “God gave us an amazing gift, and all we are required to do is feed it, water it, rest it, and move it. Yet it needs to be the right food, water, rest and movement. If we perform our assignment well, we will find energy we never knew we had. We will work better, run better, feel better, and live better.” (p108)

Flow – this is a term Sandberg uses in her book to describe pursuing activities, interests, hobbies etc. that may be something we used to do and need to revive, such as playing a sport, singing, dancing, gardening or something that is new and takes some effort to learn, like a musical instrument or a language. It may be an everyday task like Wafaa cooking Syrian food, but whatever it is, if it demands our attention, we enjoy it and it keeps us moving forward it can be emotionally healing.

“Even when we are in great distress, joy can still be found in moments we seize and moments we create. Cooking, dancing, hiking, praying, driving, singing.....all of these can provide relief from pain. And when these moments add up, we find that they give us more than happiness; they also give us strength.” (p105)

Humour – A study of the elderly in Zurich, Switzerland, illuminated the role that humour plays as a coping mechanism to maintain a state of happiness in the face of age-related adversity.

Swenson writes “People who laugh readily heal faster...Clearly humour is medicinal....Perhaps the best kind of laughter is when we laugh at ourselves.”

Sandberg notes that the research shows the benefit of humour “Humour can make us more resilient. Surgery patients who watch comedies request 25% less pain medication. Soldiers who make jokes deal better with stress. People who laugh naturally six months after losing a spouse cope better. Couples who laugh together are more likely to stay married.” (p166-167)

Strong family bonds

The research carried out by Emmy Werner showed that besides the individual psychological and dispositional strengths of the children that she followed over the years, it became apparent that “a resilient child might have a strong bond with a supportive care-giver, parent, teacher or other mentor-like figure.”

“Fostering resilience in children requires family environments that are caring and stable, hold high expectations for children’s behaviour and encourage participation in the life of the family. Most resilient children have a strong relationship with at least one adult, not always a parent.” (Source unknown)

Even children in families living in poverty are seen to do well when they are brought up in an atmosphere of warm affection, emotional support, with reasonable expectations and discipline, strong family routines and values. They develop self-esteem, self-confidence and ego-resilience that is protective to other risk factors.

How many of us can look back over our lives and name one or two individuals who were significant in helping us to reach our potential, to set our eyes on a life goal that we would otherwise never have considered possible or nurtured us in our walk with Christ? It may have been a parent, family member, Sunday school teacher, youth leader or school teacher. Someone who saw our potential, took an interest and cared enough to make a difference.

The strength of family relationships is also recorded as an important factor in the well-being and resilience of the elderly. In order to be effective these relationships need to be intimate, based on trust and honest communication so that the person is able to ask for help when needed. For most of us in the second half of life our peer relationships have probably superseded our sense of dependence on family relationships, especially when our extended families are no longer living locally. We need to have other friendships that will meet that need.

Perhaps this is our opportunity to leave a legacy and to be builders of resilience into our children and grandchildren. They face very different challenges to those that we faced at their age but they need our interest, support, and prayers, even if they don’t know it or want to admit it.

There may also be another way to build our resilience as we age, which is in making peace with the past, by strengthening and restoring the family relationships that have either suffered by neglect or been driven apart by past hurts or resentments. To carry the burden of resentments, unforgiven sin, or unresolved conflict can erode both our relationships and our resilience.

Social and community support

Did you know that a worldwide study named Britain ‘the loneliness capital of Europe’? Social isolation is an epidemic that takes an incalculable toll on our population’s mental and physical health. Chronic loneliness can increase the chances of dying prematurely from physical illnesses and social isolation can break the spirit to the extent that, an elderly person may lose the will to live. The majority of us need company to give our lives meaning. We were meant to exist within social and emotional structures for mutual support. Meaningful participation in a community plays a huge role in fostering resilience.

“The importance of healthy social supports is irrefutable. We do not simply think they work; we know they work. Whether family and friends or community and church, the existence of intact, functioning, healthy, nurturing systems of social support are as good a resource for replenishing depleted energy reserves as can be found. Love, affection, nurturing, intimacy, connectedness, bonding, attachment, empathy, community – these are “feel good” words for a reason: because they are good.” (Swenson p86)

Sandberg comments that as individuals we both need to be in a community to be resilient but that to engage in a community in a meaningful way, brings strength to that community:-

“We find our humanity – our will to live and our ability to love – in our connections to one another. Just as individuals can find post-traumatic growth and become stronger, so can communities. You never know when your community will need to call on that strength, but you can be sure that one day it will.” (p141)

“In military studies it has been found that resilience is also dependant on group support: unit cohesion and morale is the best predictor of combat resiliency within a unit or organisation. Resilience is highly correlated to peer support and group cohesion. Units with high cohesion tend to experience lower rates of psychological breakdown than units with low cohesion and morale.” (Source unknown)

We may not be in a military unit, but in many ways we are in a battle and our ability to support each other both as friends and fellow members of the body of Christ will be crucial both to our experience along the way and our finishing well. In part two we will consider resilience in our faith and what will help or hinder us in finishing well as Christ’s disciples.

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Questions for reflection

Individual attributes:-

Take some time to read and think about the life of Joseph in Genesis chapters 37, 39-45 and chapter 50:15-21.

1. What adversities, challenges and injustices did Joseph face?
2. How *could* Joseph have reacted to these difficult situations and people?
3. How did he choose to respond to the circumstances he found himself in?
4. How did Joseph use the power and success he later received in Egypt?
5. In what ways could that have been a greater threat than adversity?
6. What values and perceptions of both God and his circumstances helped Joseph to be resilient?
7. What can you learn about growing in resilience from Joseph?

Family and other key people:-

1. As you look back over your life, who have been the significant people who have helped you to reach your potential, encouraged you to achieve your goals, and to press on in following Christ?
2. In this second half of life, who do you have that you know and trust well enough to be open with and that you could turn to in a crisis knowing they will be there for you?
3. Whose company do you enjoy; who you can relax with and feel that life can be about “play” not just about work?
4. In whose life can you be a significant person, encouraging them and helping them to grow in resilience?

Social connectedness and community:-

1. What communities do you belong to?
2. Which contexts provide meaningful engagement?
3. Are there ways that you could become more socially connected and engaged in your community?
4. Do you need to be forward planning for when your circumstances might become more challenging e.g. living alone, less mobile, unable to drive, more limited financially etc.?
5. Would you know how to access social care or help if you needed it?

