

TEAM WELLNESS SERIES

PART 1 OF 5 – BUILDING RESILIENCE

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One of the goals of our first training session was to discuss psychological principles that will help improve your *resilience*, an important personal strength, that we all possess at some level. There are several iconic examples of the power and importance of resilience in overcoming extreme adversity in recent years. Here I wanted to address various topics related to improving resilience.

Resilience can be thought of as the ability to buffer yourself both mentally and physically from a variety of stressful life events and circumstances with your own personal attitudes, beliefs, and skills as well as the various interpersonal resources you have such as family and friends. Some resilience is probably biologically based whereas most resilience strengths are developed throughout life in the skills, beliefs, and values that we learn. Resilience is needed not only to cope with serious life events (including traumatic experiences), but also the ordinary challenges we face on a regular basis. In essence, resilience can be thought of an essential **life skill** that helps minimize our vulnerability to stressful demands. Higher resilience also helps us maintain stamina and persistence in meeting our goals and priorities throughout life. Resilience, once developed, is there regardless of whatever type of challenges occur in the future.

Resilience in successful adults is related to factors such as positive social relationships with others, contentment in lifetime roles (for example, as a mother, father, or coworker), and a general feeling of optimism. Resilience is needed whether or not you have experienced great adversity/trauma since we all encounter some degree of stress and challenge in everyday life. Building resilience is protective at other times in life when we will be challenged beyond normal limits.

THE NATURE OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is not an all-or-none characteristic but comes in many degrees of competence. Because there are so many factors that influence our resilience, we have to separate some factors that we do not have any control over in our lives and other factors over which we do have some control. One of the biggest factors over which we have no control are the qualities, personalities, and behavior of the adults in our early lives. For example, research consistently finds that children who have had nurturing parents or other adult figures in their life (including grandparents, teachers, spiritual leaders, etc.) will have more resilience just due to the behavior of these other people throughout life. Fortunately, even if we were not lucky enough to be in a nurturing and supportive childhood environment, this does not mean that we will not be able to develop resilience in other ways. Research has found that 50-65% of children even with severe childhood experiences eventually do become resilient adults.

ARE THERE LIMITS TO RESILIENCE?

There are many well-known cases of resilience in recent years and probably thousands that never receive any notoriety. One well known example is the story of the young girl **Malala Yousafzai**, a Pakistani teen and activist for female education, who survived a traumatic injury when shot in the head by Taliban extremists. She survived after extensive medical treatment to become an international icon of resilience and continued her work on making education available to girls and women. She became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

Alonzo “Zo” Mourning, a favorite star of the Miami Heat basketball team, is another example. He struggled as a child to challenge his biological parents in court to leave home and live with a foster family. There he was fortunate to have a loving motherly figure in his life. He succeeded in both school and sports. He received his college degree where he was a standout basketball player which led to the NBA. Later, as a professional basketball player he faced another major life challenge. He had a life-threatening illness that could only be treated with a kidney transplant from which he not only survived but thrived. Zo was part of the 2006 NBA Championship Team with the Miami Heat and he was eventually inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2014.

These are extraordinary stories of well-known individuals who overcame major adverse childhood experiences. Most of us are also familiar with others who are symbols of resilience as adult survivors such as USA Senator John McCain’s recovery after years being tortured as a POW, and Nelson Mandela who became President of South Africa after spending 27 years in prison for his anti-apartheid efforts. Resilience does not eliminate all of the negative effects and grief after traumatic events, but it does provide short and long-term buffers that help in the psychological healing process.

The reason these dramatic stories are mentioned is not that we all need to demonstrate such phenomenal feats of recovery to be successful in life with our level of resilience. However, each of us will have our own non-traumatic stressors, problems, and challenges in life that cannot be avoided. Our goal is to develop resilience in meeting these “normal” challenges such that we can help insure growth in our own personal stories of success. Normal challenges provide the true opportunities to develop and enhance our resilience to be better prepared should we encounter more significant life events.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE?

There are a number of coping skills, life-style patterns, and psychological attitudes that will improve your resilience regardless of what your current level might be. These are within your control if you are motivated to improve your resilience and overall ability to cope with life’s demands. Our Wellness series will focus on some key skills to improve your resilience, but below are some practical things that you can also do.

Healthy habits that will help build physical stamina and help you tolerate negative stress include:

- Eating at least one well-balanced meal per day;
- Getting adequate sleep most days of the week (6-8 hours);
- Having physical exertion/exercise a few times per week;
- Maintaining your weight at a relatively healthy level; and
- Avoiding excessive consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes, and/or drugs.

Some **social factors** related to confidence and positive self-esteem will also help increase your resilience. This includes maintaining a network of friends, having at least one or more close friends or family members to confide in regarding personal issues, and being able to discuss problems and express feelings openly with significant others. We should all have at least one close friend that can be called in an emergency at 3:00 AM!

Finally, there are some **lifestyle patterns** that can also improve your resilience to stress. Maintain balance in your life with time to enjoy fun/leisure activities while you meet your normal responsibilities. Try to attend important social events and to have some quiet time for yourself, even if it’s only a little time, to relax and defuse from your daily hassles and pressures.

Although we cannot be perfectly resilient to all of life’s stressors, we can be better prepared if we improve our skills now before any major events hit us. Be patient and persistent in learning these skills since the payoff can be quite important throughout life. Our hope is that by changing what is within your control and accepting other things in life that you cannot change, you will achieve a number of positive outcomes that adults with high resilience share. Our sessions will include a knowledge base, teach various physical and mental strategies that will help you conquer stress and build resilience. (see: iCopeWithStress.com)