

# Challenges vs opportunities: A different perspective of resilience

Irina Roncaglia

The National Autistic Society & The English National Ballet  
United Kingdom

Correspondence: [irina@roncaglia.co.uk](mailto:irina@roncaglia.co.uk)

Copyright. 2019. Psychreg Journal of Psychology  
ISSN: 2515-138X

---

Resilience has been researched and debated for a while among both children and the adult population with great emphasis on how children (and adults) and their well-being has been fundamental to their development and growth physical, emotional and social. Educational settings have been put under pressure in ensuring that wellness, well-being, and resilience become core topics in the new proposed curriculum (Department for Education, 2019). Workplaces and employers are looking at programmes on well-being and wellness to reduce high levels of absenteeism and ill health. With great emphasis on mental and physical health and increased cases of experienced high level of anxiety (and stress) often leading, if not ill-managed, to maladaptive patterns of behaviours and poor mental health, resilience and the ability to cope – coping, tolerance and adaptive skills – have gained real weight in the understanding of positive short and long-term well-being. This paper endeavours to explore the subject by proposing an alternative perspective and understanding of what resilience could mean and how it could be differently nurtured, developed and indeed understood. By exploring alternative narrative around adversities and challenges which are part of the life course of any human being, it aims to propose a perspective that relies on strengths, interests and opportunities. These ought to be embraced as a fundamental way for life-long learning new adaptive skills or for consolidating naturally existing ones. It concludes by reflecting on the fundamental significance for individualised programmes that take into consideration multi-factors in the development of resilience skills.

**Keywords:** mental health; resilience; stress; wellness; well-being

---

What is stress and how can it be better conceptualised? How can stress and adversarial situations be of use to individuals? How is resilience developed and fostered? This article will aim at providing some explorative answers and reflections in these areas.

### Stress and adversities: Challenges or opportunities

Sarafino (2012) defines stress as the experience when individuals perceive a discrepancy between the physical or psychological demands of a situation and the necessary resources of their biological, psychological or social systems. Stressful event (s) or adversities in a life time is nowadays taken for granted. Stress is part of life. The significant weight given to the word – though it is widely different definitions – has often led to an overemphasis of what stress actually is, how it is experienced and managed, almost to a point that exposure to it 'needs to be avoided at all cost'.

While it is recognised that severe stress can potentially lead to symptomatology and psychopathologies and subsequently poor physical and mental health, and long term exposure to unmanaged stress leads to overall serious health problems, I propose looking at stress from a different perspective which helps to promote instead the growth of resilience, coping and adaptive skills which are essential to long term human well-being and development.

Using Lazarus & Folkman (1984) transactional stress model it can be conceptualised more usefully as a transaction between an individual's coping mechanisms and resources and one's environment – rather than a state, event or unrelated experience. When stress/adversity is conceptualised in such a manner, the stressful event can be better reconstructed and re-thought as a challenge and opportunity to foster or even discover individual's coping skills and mechanisms as the stressful event is not static. It is a continuous interaction between the individual, their resources and their environment. And even if it was static, more adaptive and acceptance skills can be taught and fostered.

It is not so much about avoiding criticism, adversity or conflict, but learning that these are fundamentally key elements in equipping children (and adults) in dealing with different situations that will harness a balanced, healthy and socially integrated individual. It is looking at providing a different weight, colour and emphasis to the experience of stress, and that, again, to function optimally is actually necessary. It is also not about diminishing its significance but altering the way stress is generally taught. Not as a negative, bad, ill-thought way of perceiving the world but as an opportunity to develop, foster and enhance necessary skills.

### Resilience: Are we asking the right questions?

It is well known that resilience is not something we are born with, or a personality trait, though there are some predisposing factors which might facilitate and nurture the acquisition, fostering and/or enhancing of resilience skills (Southwick et al., 2014). In a recent article Davies (2019) discusses resilience in the context of prevention of violent extremism and suggests that foundational approaches around critical thinking and multiple perspectives are being taught in schools through PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), where learning to deal calmly, critically is a key component of resilience. Emotional resilience is also related to one's ability to successfully perform a specific task/activity – self-efficacy and self-esteem (Relajo-Howell, 2016) – as well as empathy which are recognised as key skills when having to cope and manage criticisms and aversive and conflict situations (Davies, 2019).

Southwick et al (2014) suggests that biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that interact with one another to determine how one responds to stressful experiences are the determinants of resilience – a definition which evolved from an APA (American Psychological Association, 2010) definition of resilience which states that it is: 'the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress'. The APA definition which is helpful, tends to be guiding the narrative and the questioning on the actual adversity, trauma rather than looking at the successful process of coping and adapting well – in the face of these adversities.

While we need not to lose sight of the causes of distress, anxiety, and the nature of adversities asking different questions on what actually is working, what are the components naturally implemented in the face of adversity which makes some individuals more successful in their coping mechanisms, better understanding the natural strengths that individuals are capable and able to adopt in the face of challenges and crisis might provide a different way to support the learning and development of resilience more widely.

It is often the opportunity to guide and share light, with the right line of questioning what already resilience skills are being adopted naturally in the pursuit of strong interests, even hobbies and the ability to place a light on potential existing barriers and how these are actually naturally addressed by the individual which has been an alternative approach to the development of personal resilience models.

Working with elite performers among others has guided the support in directing the light onto what individuals already have adapted on a daily basis in an area of strong interest. Through simple scenarios and experiments, barriers can be placed to support the individual in seeing and becoming aware of these existing skills. It will be over a number of sessions that further scenarios can be discussed in order to consolidate and strengthen their personal resilience skills. There is not one way of coping and each individual will be able to discover and develop their personal coping skills and mechanisms. Realistic and coproduced goal settings have been another key element for successfully clearly motivate individuals in the development of their personal resilience skills. Masten (2014) talks about a mastery motivation system which can be a very powerful driver of learning and resilience; this involves the innate enjoyment and satisfaction of engaging and interacting with the environment and set activities. The successful undertaking of these activities can also be a key internal motivator. Masten (2014) sustains again that mastery motivation is a powerful driver of resilience and one that we can observe across multiple species.

#### Flexibility and 'learnable' adaptability

Resilience can be learned, fostered, and even enhanced if we continue to challenge its definition, conceptualisation and operationalisation. Resilience might be better understood and therefore taught as a continuum. The way human beings cope or manage with a stressful, adversarial situation depends completely on the actual situation (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), repertoire of resources available and the individual's ability to apply corrective feedback.

Bonanno & Burton (2013) suggest through their work and research a 'learnable flexibility' and I would add adaptability as resilience skills are discovered, strengthened and further fostered according to the changing situation. Adapting to a changing situation, according to corrections and cognitive appraisals and re-appraisals of that situation can support individuals in harnessing both a sense of control and self-efficacy which bare great weight on motivational systems and the extent an individual is ready and able to move forward despite setbacks.

#### CONCLUSION

This article aimed at exploring and proposing an alternative understanding of the stress model in conjunction with how resilience can be better conceptualised as a continuum. Starting by revisiting and discussing the role of stress nowadays through the transactional stress model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and looking at – rather than something to be avoided at all cost, proposing through reflections of author's professional practice – how alternative definitions of stress could be more efficiently adopted. Challenges and opportunities, systems, goal settings and flexible learning, adaptability have been proposed as an alternative way to the understanding of stress, adversarial events and resilience skills.

Thinking of stress as an inevitable part of life learning, a process or continuum which sooner or later we will all be exposed to - of course with different degrees depending on context, situations, available resources at the time and inner (and outer) capacity to flexibly adapt and change by embracing the

challenge, might be a more useful and effective way to harness and strengthen natural existing resilience skills.

By accepting that there is no 'one fits all' way of best coping, but by engaging each individual in a journey of self-discovering of inner strengths (which we all to a certain extent hold already) in an open and honest way through understanding and accepting each situation and its complex systems, we might be able to not only increase preventative measures but also increase likelihood of long term lasting positive outcomes.

---

## References

- American Psychological Association (2010). *Resilience and recovery after war: Refugee children and families in the United States*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bonanno G. A, Burton C. L. (2013). Regulatory flexibility: An individual differences perspective on coping and emotion regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 591–612.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613504116>
- Davies, L. (2019). Building resilience to radicalization. *The Psychologist*. Retrieved from <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-32/september-2019/building-resilience-radicalisation>
- Department for Education (2019). Education secretary sets out vision for character and resilience. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-sets-out-vision-for-character-and-resilience>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.
- Masten A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rejojo-Howell, D. (2016, June 06). The role of adversity quotient in dealing with everyday challenges. *Psychreg*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychreg.org/adversity-quotient>
- Sarafino, E. P. (2012). *Health psychology: Biopsychosocial interactions* (7th ed.). Wiley.
- Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5, 10, 25338. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>