

Seven principles of building personal resilience: practical ways of growing through adversity

By Rod Warner

We live in turbulent times. Employees at all levels need to have inner strength and resourcefulness to cope with large scale organizational change, such as new priorities, major change initiatives, new technologies, mergers and downsizing. Outside of work, the same individuals have to cope with the “normal” stresses of daily life such as troubled relationships, financial pressures, security concerns, serious illness and death of loved ones.

We all have experience of people reacting differently to adversity and even we ourselves react differently to adversity: sometimes dealing with real hardship, difficulties and great pressure with ease, and other times struggling to just make it through the day.

The question thus arises: why do some people succumb to or become disabled by adversity, whilst others overcome similar circumstances, heal and are able to thrive? Or on a more personal level: why do we sometimes cope well and have joy in our lives, whilst other times not?

The answer seems to lie in personal resilience. To understand resilience better, we recently conducted in-depth critical incident and focus group interviews with South Africans at work asking how they deal with adversity. The outcome was exciting. We found resilience in an organizational setting enables one to remain task focused and productive whilst experiencing tough times. Resilient individuals are best able to resist stressful experiences impacting on their job productivity, remain focussed, deal with multiple demands, and stay calm and healthy. Resilience enables “bouncing back” after stressful organisational and life events and incorporates the intriguing concept of emerging from the adversity stronger and more resourceful.

From the research we extrapolated seven principles for building personal resilience, which are shown in Figure 1. These are useful guides for anyone who

wants to build their resilience, live a more joyful and fulfilling life and ultimately flourish.

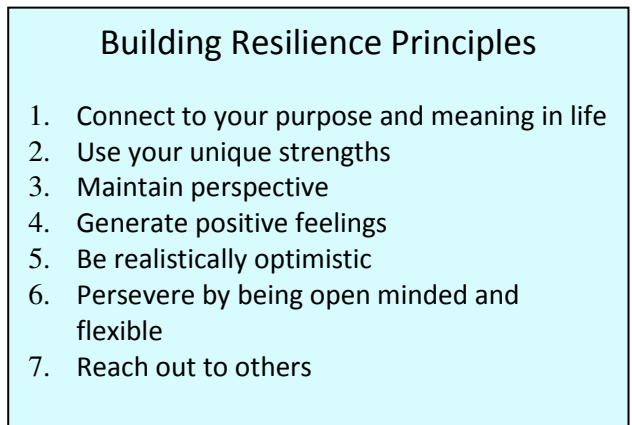


Figure 1: Building Resilience Principles

Brief descriptions of each principle together with practical ways of growing through adversity follow:

1. CONNECT TO YOUR PURPOSE AND MEANING IN LIFE

We have all wrestled with the question of what gives meaning and purpose to our lives and for many people this search is ongoing. The hum-drum issues of paying bills, resolving work problems, cleaning our homes, and so on, easily distracts from the focus of living an authentic life aimed at fulfilling a higher purpose. In times of adversity however, this becomes very important as it directly addresses the issue of why persevere rather than just giving up.

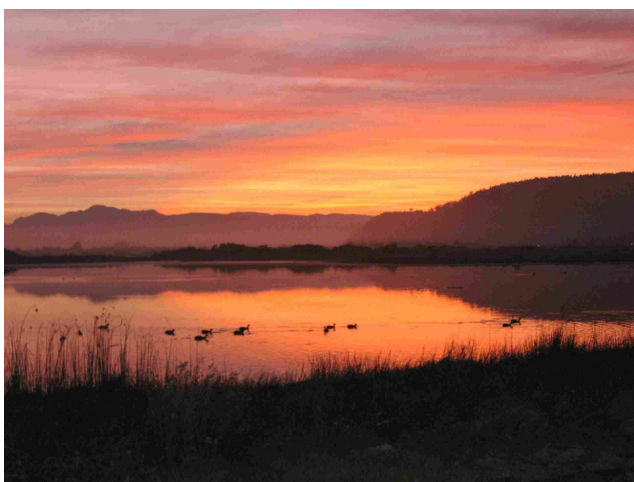
A strong sense of purpose and meaning is the bedrock from which coping, healing and renewal after adversity is made possible.

Our research found that purpose and meaning is typically found in one or more of three categories of significance – people, causes and faith. **Significant people** most often referred to children and partners for whom there was deep caring and love: to show their love; provide for them, live up to their expectations or set an example; or simply “not let them down”.

Significant causes were diverse and examples given were de-oiling penguins; raising funds to sustain a shelter for homeless people; adopting an AIDS orphan; and preserving indigenous fynbos in the Western Cape. One participant in the research described her passionate commitment to a significant cause as her “magnificent obsession”.

Significant faith was frequently cited and examples ranged from formal religion which gave a powerfully felt deep connection to a personal relationship with their Creator, to a less formal feeling of connection to the Universe and the interrelatedness of life which also gave strong feelings of purpose to life.

In the face of adversity, the personal meaning assigned to living sustains and provides the motivation to persevere. This connection and personal belief system was sometimes expressed as the adversity having a higher purpose or meaning, even if it was not clear at the time. For example on the death of a child, the young father said: “I don’t know why this happened, but I do know that there is a reason for everything. So I have to accept it and carry on”.



This principle of resilience: “Connect to your purpose and Meaning in Life” also incorporates the belief that by persevering through the adversity and tough times, people will emerge stronger, more resourceful and better for the experience. For example, “special children have special parents” was the mantra-type of explanation cited in one incident for coping with severe demands placed on a financially struggling family who were rearing children with learning difficulties.

Developing life goals related to one’s purpose and meaning is a very important strategy to strengthen this principle in one’s life. This was demonstrated by an entrepreneur, who when he was experiencing significant and prolonged financial business difficulties, repeatedly publicly committed himself to financing and building a temple for worship. He frequently reminded himself of this vision, and talked in public of his plans, how it would be built and what it would look. This goal helped connect him to what he expressed as his purpose in life, and energized and focused his energies to persevere in what he described as his “dark night”.

2. USE YOUR UNIQUE STRENGTHS

Self knowledge emerged as an important component of resilience.

Realistic self insight into one’s own character strengths and vulnerabilities is the basis for understanding one’s capabilities and limits when dealing with adversity.

Character strengths are different to job strengths: the former are life-long whereas job strengths are specific and change with circumstances. Unfounded beliefs about character strengths as well as vulnerabilities can potentially hinder or even derail action to recover from adversity.

People describe using their strengths as “light”, “easy”, “fun” and “obvious”. Using our natural character strengths to problem solve, devise creative solutions and reach out to others during adversity comes easy to us, as well as being experienced as fun and even joyful.

During our training workshops however, people often struggle to identify their strengths, whilst they are able to quickly reel off a list of weaknesses or “development areas”. Ironically they frequently report having tried to improve their weaknesses for many years, often with slow or even no progress! Character strengths on the other hand, are frequently downplayed as it is sometimes felt that acknowledging and deliberately focussing on them would be boasting. This lack of balance is unfortunate, because logically there should be greater success when using natural strengths than weaknesses in coping with adversity.

Knowledge of personal vulnerabilities or weaknesses is also important, as accurate self insight enables the development of a realistic recovery strategy and expectations from adversity. This was pithily expressed by a manager who after describing an acrimonious divorce and having to sell and split the proceeds of a struggling small business, stated: “I know who I am; what I can do and what I cant do. I have been through a lot of crap, and I have become an expert on myself.”

Having overcome previous adversities, particularly significant ones, can be a source of strength, optimism and welcome positive feelings.

Developing and correcting one’s weaknesses to a minimum level of competence will at best prevent failure. Developing and using character strengths on the other hand has the potential to create personal excellence. Using character strengths is uplifting and sets the foundation to live a fulfilling and joyful life.

An ultra distance road runner said that training for and finishing 9 Comrades Marathons (79 kilometre road race), had taught him to persevere and not give up when things got tough – and the race became a metaphor for his life which he cited as: “when the going gets tough, the tough gets going”. He knew his strengths and effectively capitalised in them in times of adversity.

3. MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

Maintaining perspective concerns the inner world of one’s thoughts. It is particularly important because as a species we are programmed from our past to be more alert for negative than positive. This negative focus was very useful in providing narrow, fixed and detailed focus when confronted by a sabre-toothed lion or marauding tribes on the veld of ancient Africa, but is less helpful in finding creative solutions to modern day adversities which require open, creative and flexible thinking. In today’s world, this ancient negative bias sometimes intrudes into our lives as unwelcome strong and persistent negative thoughts.

A person described this ruminating negative thought pattern to be: “like in a washing machine ... going round and round ... then pausing and then going round and round again; on and on”.

To build resilience, negatively biased thinking and persistent negative self talk can be reframed. This can be done by finding alternative ways of thinking about the problem or event, such as how one can learn from it, or how one can accept it. Other ways of reframing are to choose milder and less calamitous ways of expressing the adversity, or to change the statements that run through one’s mind into questions, and then focus your thoughts on finding answers to the questions.

Some people find that changing their behaviour changes their negative thought bias and thinking patterns. Examples are exercising; talking with supportive friends; eating a favourite food such as chocolate or ice-cream; shopping; going to movies; reading a novel; partying. Not all these activities will reduce everyone’s negative thinking – the challenge is to find what works for you. The outcome should be distraction from the stress of the adversity, recharging energy and then returning with renewed vigour to deal with the stress and difficulties.

It is also useful where possible to avoid or minimise situations which trigger persistent negative thoughts. Examples we were given of situations to avoid were of particular events (e.g. a stressful monthly family get together), people (e.g. negative colleagues or difficult clients) and physical conditions (e.g. tiredness and being hungry). Alternatively, challenging negativism in others, such as negative statements and opinions that are unfounded, biased, or open to interpretation may also be a useful way of controlling one’s own negative thoughts in order to maintain perspective.

A final element of this principle of building resilience is maintaining perspective by engaging in enjoyable, relaxing and recharging activities. Taking steps to change the scenery, pace and people around one can provide a counterbalance to the intense demands and naturally narrowing thought focus when dealing with adversity. This was variously expressed as “taking time out for myself”; “having me-time”; and “taking time to smell the roses”.

4. GENERATE POSITIVE FEELINGS

Adversity typically involves strong negative emotions which have the potential to hijack rational thought and so reduce resilience. Fear, anger, guilt and grief are commonly experienced during the “dark night” of real adversity. These negative emotions are associated with surges in adrenaline and cortisol

(the “stress hormone”) which prepare the body for the life preserving fight, flight or freeze responses. In modern times however, the associated physical reactions are seldom useful and if experienced over a prolonged period, can be harmful.

Negative feelings are in themselves not “bad” as they convey important messages about the severity of the adversity. In excess however, they can lead to substantially reduced mental and even physical functionality and thus the capability to deal with the adversity: thinking and decision-making become impaired; sleeping, eating and relaxing become difficult.



Some species of Cape fynbos require fire in order to bloom best (Cyrtanthus ventricosus)

The need to control strong feelings was highlighted in our research by a single parent mother of a 14 year old son who was living in a gang infested part of the Cape Flats area of Cape Town. She described him as having been “an ideal child” doing well at school, having good friends, attending church with her and helping out in their small apartment. Then seemingly out of the blue she one day realized that his behaviour had changed, he was missing school and mixing with a different group of friends. On investigation, she discovered he was taking tik (a highly addictive amphetamine drug). She described her initial emotions as a mixture of extreme anger, fear, depression, hurt, guilt and disappointment. Confronting the boy and getting him into rehabilitation required her to not succumb to these

powerful feelings, which she achieved with guidance from her employer’s Employee Assistance Programme. Once she had mastered her fears, she was able to deal rationally with the boy and got him to successfully undergo a drug rehabilitation programme.

Strategies to deal with strong personal negative emotions include deep breathing, taking time out, positive self talk (although recent studies have indicated that simply reciting affirmations can in some cases do more harm than good) and meditation.

Controlling negative feelings is the first step; generating positive feelings needed for resilience in order to bounce back is the next. Positive feelings are effectively created by connecting to one’s purpose and meaning in life, using one’s innate strengths and reaching out to others. In addition, there are two exercises we have found useful in generating genuine positive feelings. The first is a savouring exercise which involves reflecting daily on three good things which you have done each day and their impact on others. The second involves writing a journal of the best possible outcomes for yourself in the future using topics such as loving relationships; career; finances; physical; faith; health; hobbies and so on. Both exercises typically result in enhanced feelings of excitement and joy in living a life of involvement and potential.

5. BE REALISTICALLY OPTIMISTIC

The principle of being realistically optimistic to build personal resilience concerns choosing to live with a positive attitude.

This positive attitude should be realistic however, as being over optimistic or not having the optimism based in reality usually results in unrealistic expectations and ultimately disappointment when they are not fulfilled.

At the heart of this principle is the strong belief that one can to a large extent influence the direction of one’s life and that the inevitable problems

encountered along life's journey can be solved. This construct echoes Viktor Frankl's (1982) thoughts and logotherapy concepts: "...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way". Resilience thus entails choosing to be positive rather than negative.

We all tell ourselves stories about ourselves to make sense of our experiences of life (explanatory style). These stories have the power to mould and ultimately define who we are, and in this way, the stories we tell ourselves create ourselves. Optimists view the good things they experience as permanent and affect everything, whereas the bad things they experience are perceived as temporary and have limited effect on their overall lives.

Some people are born more optimistic than others, but the good news is that realistic optimism can be enhanced and so one does not need to be stuck in the mind-set of persistently seeing doom and gloom. One of the ways of enhancing optimism is to reframe the adversity which was described under the principle of maintaining perspective. This enables one to change the story one tells oneself, and thus choose a more balanced and positive outlook on life.

There are two additional simple but powerful exercises which can assist building resilience by enhancing realistic optimism: reflecting on the good that has happened to you over the past 24 hours and reflecting on what you are really grateful for and why. The benefits are profound: people who do these exercises regularly report enhanced optimism, positivity, energy and connectedness.

6. PERSEVERE BY BEING OPEN MINDED AND FLEXIBLE

Dealing with adversity inevitably requires some action or some change to cope with and address difficult circumstances. Perseverance is the key. Perseverance is however a double-edged sword. On the one hand, too little perseverance means we succumb or become disabled by the adversity. We all have experienced how easy and even tempting it is during really tough times to surrender to

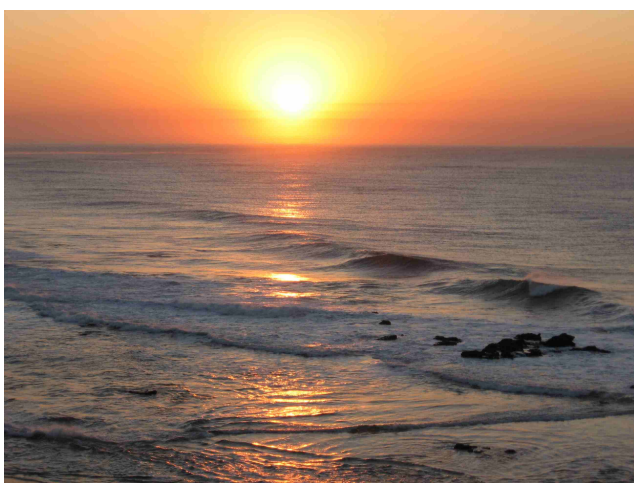
inactivity, stupor and defeat and be tempted to give up.

An excess of perseverance on the other hand often results in a blinkered and bull-headed approach characterised by a fixed mindset; minimal listening; tunnel vision; and brute force to deal with the adversity. In such cases it is often "action for the sake of action" with little or no time for creative thinking or reflecting. In this way, both too much and too little perseverance can lead to poor decisions which create their own unintended negative consequences.

Resilience in dealing with adversity requires open-mindedness and a flexible problem solving approach, allowing for listening, consideration of differing views and being open to a change of tactics or even strategy.

Being open minded and flexible in building resilience is illustrated by the different courses of actions taken by two pharmacists who owned and managed separate pharmacies approximately three kilometres apart, who were faced with the promulgation of radically changed legislation controlling the exit prices charged on prescription medication. The implication for them was at the very least they faced substantially reduced profit, and at worst bankruptcy. The first pharmacist dealt with this adversity by advocating for changes in the legalisation through the local chapter of the pharmaceutical association, and then later at national level, and was instrumental in getting court interdicts to stop and ultimately alter the legislation. During the many months this dragged on, he changed the pharmacy's focus to become more retail orientated in order to take advantage of the increasing tourist trade. He now has the highest turnover in sun-screen protection sales in his geographical region, and makes more profit from the retail side of the business than he did from the sales of prescription medication in the past.

The second pharmacist faced the identical adversity but reacted with less open mindedness and flexibility. His strategy was to boost sales by getting more repeat business from his existing client base by means of mailed flyers; lowering the prices of some of his non-prescription lines; and introducing a motor-cycle delivery to customers. Deep down he felt that these actions were not very creative and would not have the desired effect. Over time he stopped introducing new ideas and became increasingly despondent as his worst fears were borne out. He eventually sold the business at a low price to a national retail chain, and with great relief took early retirement.



Even though the adversity these pharmacists faced was identical and their circumstances were remarkably similar, their reactions were very different. The first pharmacist persevered with creativity and lateral thinking over several years and was ultimately successful, whilst the second pharmacist allowed the adversity to overwhelm his thinking and natural optimism, and it eventually almost crushed him.

In times of stress, meditation and centering can help create inner calm enabling open-mindedness and flexibility.

There are several ways to achieve this calm. One is to close your eyes, become aware of your breathing,

and then to concentrate on slowing your breathing. As you slowly inhale, silently say, "let", and as you slowly exhale, silently say "go"..... while also relaxing tense body muscles. This simple exercise is a great way to release emotional stress and physical tension.

7. REACH OUT TO OTHERS

"Other people matter" is the pithy finding of noted psychology researchers Christopher Peterson, Jane Dutton, Kim Cameron and others. This concept especially applies to dealing with adversity and so the seventh and last principle in building resilience is: Reach out to others.

This principle has two components – reaching out to others **to ask** for help, as well as reaching out to others **to offer** help.

Asking for help is often difficult to do. For people who have a socialised "cowboys-don't-cry" attitude, even the idea of admitting to having a problem can be very threatening, never mind asking for help. Males, as a generalisation, seem to have more difficulty than females when it comes to asking for help. In addition, and again as a generalisation, the more senior a person is in the organisational hierarchy, the more difficult it is to ask for help. This may be because asking for and accepting assistance may be perceived as a weakness or demonstration of not being up to the task and a sign of not coping.

Other concerns about asking for help include:

- "I will feel embarrassed"
- "It will make me look stupid"
- "The person wont respect me afterwards"
- "The person wont want to help"
- "I will be surrendering control to another person"
- "The other person may ask for something in return"

As a consequence of these fears, we may err on the side of delay in asking for help and thereby possibly allow the problem to get worse. Like most difficult conversations, it is thus better to have the conversation asking for help sooner rather than later.

On the other hand, offering and giving support and assistance to others is usually an easier conversation – particularly in a work context if one’s role requires mentoring and coaching. There is a payoff for the person giving the support – assisting others in need boosts the giver’s resilience, even in cases when the giver is experiencing adversity themselves.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whilst no-one chooses to experience tough times and adversity, successfully dealing with adversity does have an upside. Personal growth and development occurs most when one is in unfamiliar territory, when comfort levels are breached, and when one is out of one’s depth and struggling. Adversity creates such an environment, and a response based on resilience enables growth and development, and even life-enhancing change, to take place. This in turn enables the experience of real joy and fulfilment in ones life.

The personal benefit for staff in being resilient is that they have inner strength and resourcefulness to absorb “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and live a joyful life. In this context,

resilience is the life-force through which one can overcome adversity, and strive towards self actualisation.

But is resilience teachable? The answer is a resounding **yes**. Our research has demonstrated that the innate skills relating to each of the seven building resilience principles can be developed and enhanced through training in specific resilience-building tools. These tools have been used successfully by both individuals and teams. When delegates who completed resilience training were asked if they would able to put their newly learnt resilience coping strategies into immediate use at work and at home, 100% of the delegates reported “yes.” Follow-up studies also indicate a statistically significant sustained improvement in resilience over time.

Imagine your organisation staffed with resilient people who have abundant inner strength, energy and resourcefulness, with skills that enable them to cope with mergers, new strategies, major change initiatives, new technologies and downsizing. Wouldn’t that make a difference to your team and organisational results!

Rod Warner

Rod heads up the Building Resilience Group. He has wide consulting and in-depth experience in learning design, facilitation and skills development. His passion and field of specialisation is in building personal resilience in individuals and teams. His clients include Old Mutual, BP, Royal Swaziland Sugar Corporation, City of Cape Town, Local, Provincial and National Government Departments. He has held positions heading up People Development and managing a national sales force with administration teams for Old Mutual. Rod has a BA, TTHD, HIA, and is a Chartered HR Practitioner with the South African Board of Personnel Practice

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