

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Resilience is key to people not only overcoming adversity but also thriving, writes Sara Hudson

What are the hidden qualities which enable some people to overcome hardship while others seem trapped in a cycle of despair, perpetuating the same dysfunction on their children as they experienced themselves? Psychologists studying this phenomenon have labelled it ‘resilience’.¹

Resilience is related to how people respond to certain life events. Some people may perceive an event as traumatic, while others see it as an opportunity to learn and grow. The challenge for psychologists studying resilience is that determining whether someone is resilient or not depends on their life circumstances. It is hard for those who have not experienced any real adversity to know how they would respond to a challenging situation and whether they would display resilience.²

The types of environmental threats that can test whether someone is resilient vary. Some are the result of difficult living conditions, such as poverty, domestic violence and abuse, which tend to be ongoing and chronic. Others are more acute, such as witnessing a traumatic or violent incident, or being in a car accident. The intensity of the stress experienced from an acute experience may be higher than the intensity of the stress from chronic adversity, however, the cumulative impact of long-term stress tends to be more significant.³

In recent times the word resilience has become overused. Hundreds of books on being resilient have been published.⁴ The term resilience has even found its way into companies’ mission statements and government policies in Australia; for example, the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training states that: ‘student resilience and wellbeing are essential for both academic and social development’.⁵ The Attorney General’s

office even has the Australian Resilience Awards to recognise and promote initiatives which strengthen communities’ resilience after a disaster.⁶

The overuse of the term has led some commentators to argue that the word resilient has become devoid of meaning.⁷ Helicopter parents are accused of reducing their children’s abilities to cope with challenges—to persevere when things get hard—to be resilient. Yet is this use of the word resilient really what it means to have resilience? Are children really overcoming adversity when they are expected to do their homework by themselves?

Other criticisms of the recent focus on resilience are that it puts the onus on the individual to be persistent and overcome their difficulties, and ignores the structural reasons behind disadvantage and dysfunction. Some people are luckier than others. Those fortunate to be born into lives of privilege can never really imagine what it is like to be hungry or abused by those meant to love and protect them.

The original meaning of resilience

The use of the word resilient should remain true to its original meaning and reflect situations when people have managed not only to survive adversity but also have actually overcome it and become successful. Norman Garmezy, the developmental psychologist who first studied resilience, was particularly struck by one patient—a nine year old boy with an alcoholic mother and



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an absent father.⁸ Every day the boy would come to school with a ‘bread sandwich’—two slices of bread and nothing in between. According to Garmezy the boy didn’t want people to feel pity for him or know about his mother’s inability to look after him, so he would come to school with his ‘bread sandwich’ and a smile on his face. This boy was the first of a number of children Garmezy studied who ended up succeeding, even excelling, despite growing up in incredibly difficult circumstances.⁹

Before Garmezy’s groundbreaking research on resilience, most research on trauma centred on people’s vulnerability and the factors that led to children becoming damaged. Garmezy’s work turned this research on its head by taking a strength-based approach and looking at the protective factors—the elements of a person’s personality—that enabled them to achieve success despite the challenges they faced.¹⁰

A 32-year longitudinal study of 698 children found two-thirds of the children came from backgrounds that were stable and relatively happy, while one-third came from backgrounds which could be described as ‘at risk’. The study found that not all at-risk children reacted to their difficult circumstances in the same way. While two-thirds of them followed the usual trajectory and ‘developed serious learning or behaviour problems’, the remaining third developed into ‘competent, confident, and caring young adults.’¹¹

Although there was an element of luck involved—for example, some children were fortunate to have an adult in their life who acted as a mentor to them—factors that set the resilient children apart from the others were mostly psychological. The children who displayed resilience tended to be more autonomous and independent. They would also actively seek out new experiences and use whatever skills they had effectively. Most importantly, the more resilient children believed they and not their circumstances were responsible for their achievements. In other words, the resilient children saw themselves as the ‘orchestrators of their own fates’.¹²

Daniel’s story¹³

Somebody who embodies these traits of resilience is Daniel Davis, who is now CEO of Gallop

Solutions, a business education company. Daniel’s early years were very difficult. His parents divorced when he was born and he grew up in a household characterised by domestic violence, alcohol abuse and drugs. Estranged from his father, he has not been able to trace his Aboriginal heritage. His stepfather was a bikie and many of his relatives were in and out of jail. By the time he was in Year 7, Daniel had attended 13 different schools and moved house more than 21 times. His chaotic upbringing meant he found it very hard to keep up at school and Daniel says he hated school, likening it to being in jail.

Resilient children saw themselves as ‘orchestrators of their own fates’.

At the age of 13 Daniel decided to leave home. One good thing his stepfather did was help Daniel get his first job at the age of 10 working in a timber mill. The job helped to teach Daniel discipline and gave him a sense of self-worth and independence. By the age of 13 Daniel had three casual jobs which gave him enough money to pay board to a family friend and move out of home. Despite not liking school, Daniel continued with his education, completing high school while working to support himself. Although leaving home at such a young age was challenging, Daniel says it was also a relief to finally have some stability in his life. He experienced many dark days when he contemplated suicide, but ultimately he was driven to keep going because he wanted to succeed and show everyone that he could make something of his life.

When he first left school Daniel was not sure what he wanted to do. He continued to work doing odd jobs and eventually got a job working the nightshift in a service station. It was here that he got his first big break. At the service station he was fortunate to have a very good manager who acted as a mentor to him and taught him how to manage staff and run a business. His boss allowed Daniel to accompany him when he visited stores he was considering buying and developing. After his boss decided not to buy a store in the Blue Mountains because it was too far away, Daniel decided to buy it himself.

He was only 21 years old but already managing a service station and engaged to be married. Daniel took all the money he was saving for his wedding and used it to buy his first business.

It was tough building up his business but Daniel had a vision of what the store could become and kept working hard to achieve his goal. Initially he lived in the back storeroom and worked from 5am until 11pm, seven days a week, for two years. By the time he was 23 he had a seven figure income and owned three service stations.

Daniel attributes his success to having the right attitude and approach to life—to seeing every setback as a learning opportunity. According to Daniel you need to have strong self-belief and not be afraid to take risks and fail to be successful in business: ‘I’ve seen a lot of people fail and then give up . . . they don’t look at failure as being part of the journey.’ Daniel says many people told him what he was trying to achieve was impossible but he chose not to listen to them.

Daniel has had his fair share of setbacks to overcome. His businesses suffered financially following the Global Financial Crisis and a partner of a company he invested in went bankrupt, leaving Daniel responsible for running a business he had no experience in. Daniel optimistically thought he would be able to turn around the business’s fortunes in six months, but nothing he did seemed to work. He was working 80-100 hours a week but the business continued to haemorrhage \$50,000 a month. It was then that Daniel sought assistance from Gallop Solutions, a business education company which aims to give business owners the tools they need to run their businesses effectively. Daniel doubted Gallop Solutions would be able to help. However, he was pleasantly surprised when, after following their advice, his business broke even for the first time in three years.

Daniel was so impressed by the support that Gallop Solutions provided him, and wanted to see the same help available to other business owners, that he bought the company and became its CEO. In the last five years, Gallop Solutions has provided support to over 350 companies. Daniel aims to expand the product offering and venture into new markets both nationally and internationally.



Daniel's first business in Blackheath

Daniel believes that working from such a young age gave him the skills and work ethic he needed to succeed in business. According to Daniel he was a shy child with very little social skills but working in a customer service role forced him to become more outgoing. He views the types of people he works with as critical to his company’s success, stating that: ‘It’s all about people—we only deal with nice people.’

Another important element that drives Daniel is the opportunity his business success affords him to give back to the community. Among the various charities and initiatives he supports is Our Big Kitchen, a community-run kitchen which prepares and distributes meals to people in need. He also talks to troubled teenagers about his life and what he has gone through. Daniel hopes that his talks will inspire young people to change their lives. One of his most rewarding experiences giving these talks was when a Year 8 student came up to him afterwards and said: ‘you’ve really influenced me and I just wanted to tell you I got a job at McDonalds.’ ‘Whilst seemingly a small achievement, this is often the first major step towards a successful career and life,’ Daniel says.

Breaking free from a vicious cycle

Recent research from Germany and Finland suggests Daniel is not the only person to come from a troubled background who feels motivated to give back to others less fortunate in the community. According to the research with more than 1,500 Finnish secondary school students (aged 16–18 years at the beginning of the survey and 25–27

years at its end), young people who received less parental affection than their peers were more civic-minded as adults than their peers who had experienced high parental warmth and support. One of the reasons the researchers gave for this finding was that young people who had close relationship with their parents tended to be more insular and to only care about people within their ‘own circle.’¹⁴

In Australia, there are a number of successful Indigenous people who have overcome personal hardships and gone on to play a key role in helping disadvantaged members of their community. For example, Anthony Cavanagh, CEO of Ganbina—one of Australia’s most successful Indigenous school-to-work transition programs—was abandoned by his mother and homeless at the age of 13. Even though few of his male relatives could read and write and no-one in his immediate family had ever finished high school, Anthony says education ‘saved him’. With all the turmoil in his life growing up in an abusive home, education was his only ‘constant.’¹⁵

Another Indigenous leader who sees education as the gateway to opportunity is Waverly Stanley, founder of Yalari, a scholarship program that identifies Indigenous children doing well at primary school and provides them with the opportunity for an education at some of the best boarding schools in Australia. Waverly’s own experience—one of his teachers recognised his potential and helped him to attain a scholarship to attend a boarding school for his high school education—inspired him to help improve the educational outcomes of other Indigenous children.¹⁶

Currently, the federal government is considering using data analysis to try and ‘crack the back’ of long-term welfare dependency.¹⁷ However, rather than taking a deficit-based approach that looks at the factors that lead to people becoming welfare dependent, the government would be better off focusing on the factors that have enabled people to break free from the cycle of intergenerational welfare dependency. We should not assume that just because children come from disadvantaged backgrounds that their future is written in stone. While many children from abusive backgrounds

do struggle to overcome the tragic circumstances of their birth, others, such as Daniel, go on to lead very successful lives. Key to being resilient in the face of adversity is believing that you are the ‘orchestrator of your own destiny’. The best way to help disadvantaged children believe this is to showcase positive stories of success.

Endnotes

- 1 Maria Konnikova, ‘How People Learn To Become Resilient’, *The New Yorker* (11 February 2016), <http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/the-secret-formula-for-resilience>
- 2 As above.
- 3 As above.
- 4 Parul Sehgal, ‘The Profound Emptiness of Resilience’, *The New York Times Magazine* (1 December 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/the-profound-emptiness-of-resilience.html?_r=1
- 5 Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, ‘Student Resilience and Well-Being’, <https://www.education.gov.au/student-resilience-and-wellbeing>
- 6 Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department, ‘Resilient Australia Awards’, <https://www.ag.gov.au/EmergencyManagement/About-us-emergency-management/Resilient-Australia-awards/Pages/default.aspx>
- 7 Sehgal, ‘The Profound Emptiness of Resilience’.
- 8 Konnikova, ‘How People Learn To Become Resilient’.
- 9 As above
- 10 As above.
- 11 As above
- 12 As above.
- 13 This section is based on a personal interview and *Fifty Unsung Business Heroes: Great Australian Success Stories* (Purpose Publishing, 2015), <https://unsungbusinessheroes.com.au/>
- 14 Marie K. Pavlova, Rainer K. Silbereisen, Mette Ranta and Katariina Salmela-Aro, ‘Warm and Supportive Parenting Can Discourage Offspring’s Civic Engagement in the Transition to Adulthood’, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (June 2016, epub ahead of print), http://www.uni-jena.de/en/Research+News/FM160704_Jugendliche_Engagement_en.html
- 15 Quoted in Tony Featherstone, ‘The Power of Knowledge’, *Company Directors Magazine* (Australian Institute of Company Directors, March 2016), pp. 18-19.
- 16 Yalari website, ‘How It All Started’, <http://www.yalari.org/pages/how-it-all-started.php>
- 17 Matthew Doran, ‘Federal Government Aims to Use Data Analysis to Crack Long-term Welfare Dependence’, *ABC News* (25 July 2016), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-25/welfare-system-overhaul-to-eliminate-long-term-dependency/7657270>