

Resilience – Is it just another buzz word?

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It's official. People are happier having sex than commuting. I know this because I read it in Richard Layard's book 'Happiness.' It's on page 15 right at the top of the list of what makes people happy. Commuting is number fifteen. And the reason I quote this research to you is to demonstrate that sometimes research delightfully confirms for us things that we already know to be true. (Unless of course you put commuting at the top of your list which suggests you are using some fabulous form of transport unknown to most of us.)

The idea of resilience kind of falls into this category of confirming what we already know to be true. That for instance, you are likely to be doing better in life if you have a sense of meaning rather than having a sense of 'meaninglessness.' Hardly surprising but kind of confirming. And before getting too carried away with discussions about resilience, here is some sort of definition. And it's a fairly standard definition. Resilience is that ongoing process of growing into a strong healthy person able to bounce back from the inevitable hardships and tough times that life puts in the way. And as we all know, some people do tend to bounce right back while others find it a much harder thing to do. So the question is reasonably asked if there is anything we can do to help develop and strengthen this resilience in people. Many of us think that there is. Hence this paper.

Is 'resilience' just another buzz word? It well might be, or at least is in danger of becoming so. The word 'resilience' is being used quite a lot recently and as often happens with popular ideas, their very popularity can lead to over-use with the subsequent eroding of the important thinking behind the word. What the word 'resilience' represents is something quite worthwhile and it would be a good thing if we kept it alive and real. So the aim in writing this paper and presenting the workshop which goes with it is to:

- Make a case for resilience. Yes, it is a real 'thing' and has value for all of us
- Encourage vigilance in all of us to keep resilience alive as a vibrant and relevant dynamic
- Offer a working framework of resilience principles
- Suggest ways in which this framework of resilience can find practical application in what can reasonably be called 'the helping professions.'

So you will know what it is I am referring to let me offer you my list of ingredients for resilience. I have been drawn to these, because each of them as real dynamics arises over and over again in both research and in the experience of my work. And secondly, this framework is useable. It can be translated into do-able actions.

Seven elements of resilience

- **Meaning**
- **Meaningful relationships**
- **Participation**
- **Personal power**
- **A positive sense of self**
- **Other's positive expectations**
- **Hope.**

And each of these explained a little more...

Meaning

People need to have a sense of purpose, a sense that what we do and who we are actually matters

Meaningful relationships

Being connected to other people in mutually fulfilling, supportive and uplifting ways seems to be good for us. Some of us are more in contact with others, some of us less so. Some people learn to be comfortably alone while others are just lonely. So there are variations. Having said this, for most us, relationships really matter

Participation

Being actively involved in what happens around us, rather than being passive recipients of whatever we are offered, is good for us. It creates a sense of involvement and interest in our own lives and those of others

Personal power

Having some sense of control, some power, influence in our lives builds within us a confidence and ability to tackle life's hardships and challenges

A positive sense of self

This is much more than self esteem. It is a deep sense of worth, of belonging, of having a clear place and purpose, a sense of agency or personal influence, a sense of being in charge of our own lives

Other's positive expectations

We are likely to flourish when others expect the best of us. (The reverse is also true). These expectations need to be positive, high and realistic. We tend to do well when others focus on what we can do rather than what we can't; on our qualities rather than our shortcomings

Hope

We need a sense that we can get through something; a belief, a faith that 'things can be better', that 'life will be okay', that 'I will prevail.'

Of course, these are just words sitting on a page, but these seven elements can be brought to life in very real ways on a daily basis and later in this paper I will try to detail how this might happen. And while the idea of resilience is often used in relation to young people, it seems to have relevance and application for people of any age, for couples, families and communities, for organizations and communities and for our society as a whole. And just to let you know, in this paper sometimes I refer to these elements as 'principles' of resilience. I also refer to them as factors, dynamics or ingredients. It really just depends on the sentence, but what I am referring to is always the same idea, that is, the seven elements as outlined above.

In the part that follows I have laid out some of the research based evidence, the expressed positions taken by various agencies charged with the welfare of young people, as well as some philosophical statements from several individuals. All of this is by way of making some sort of a case for the framework I have outlined.

I am of course attracted to ideas and research which fit with my experience of the world. And as biased as I am, I hope I haven't actually chosen only research and opinions which suit my own view. For me, the experience of my work with people of all ages across the world for the past 30 years confirms for me that these principles are worthy of our attention, and I am pleased to say that I am able to find considerable research that supports this view.

So in starting to make a case for resilience I shall go all white-coat and laboratory here and without any particular sense of order, present some research.

The evidence

Happiness

I shall start by returning to Richard Layard's book about happiness. I would like to say that despite my flippant use of his research, I really like his book. And Richard comes up with a list of factors which research tells him affect people's happiness. And here they are:

The big seven factors affecting happiness

- **Family relationships**
- **Financial situation**
- **Work**
- **Community and friends**
- **Health**
- **Personal freedom**
- **Personal values.**

I need to say immediately that clearly for many people across our planet, this list is irrelevant. Many live, on a daily basis, lives of deprivation and oppression. For these people, liberation, safety and adequate food and shelter would be a priority. Similarly for a person with a serious medical condition, it would hardly be surprising for health to move up this list.

And so I agree with many others that resilience is contextual. It is also not a finished product, but is an ongoing process changing over time. Yet even with these constraints I think we can still develop a workable framework.

Returning to Richard's happiness list, you may notice that there is an overlap with some of the ideas of the framework I outlined earlier. And it might be interesting to note that they were developed independently of each other. Now of course I do know that happiness is not exactly the same as resilience. But there does seem a connection. Given a reasonable standard of physical living, it is hard to imagine a resilient person being constantly miserable, unable to do anything about their misery. This person may be sad from time to time or be grief-struck at those moments in life when something comes along which is tragic. But I would expect a resilient person to re-establish some sense of equilibrium and by personality and ability, manage their emotions and circumstances. Most of us have seen people do exactly this. So while resilience and happiness are not the same there seems to be an overlap and Richard's list suggests (among other things of course) that people do better if we have some control (freedom) over our lives and if we are connected to others (family, community and friends).

Control

When I first heard (through Radio National) Len Syme speaking about 'the control factor' I got really excited and decided to find out more about his work. Among other things I found his website to which I refer you for more information on the topic of personal power. What caught my attention was his assertion that when people feel they have control of their lives, their health, in multiple and complex ways, improves. What Len is saying is that a sense of control over one's life is one of the most powerful determinants of overall well-being, physical and emotional. While this did not surprise me I was delighted to hear it. I have long been struck by how profoundly devastating it can be when people give up their power or have it taken from them; by individuals, processes, groups, agencies or person-less systems. (Oops, bit political here). I have also always been amazed at just how extraordinary the reverse can be. That how uplifting it is for people when they develop faith in themselves and start to take charge of their lives.

Len Syme as Professor of Epidemiology at the University of California Berkeley California has some cred; and a stack of research to back up his assertions. Do check him out further. I'll just add that in my work and in my personal life I continue to be impressed with how the quality of a person's life lifts quite extraordinarily when that person decides to be more in charge of their life; to make decisions, to 'light a candle rather than curse the darkness.'

The need for progress

A somewhat different but interestingly related view is offered by the popular press in an article in the October 2006 edition of 'Wish Magazine' by Nick Baylis entitled 'Happy Campers' in which he says that: '...aiming to be happier is *not* what nature intended as our priority in life. It is progress.' This progress he describes as: '...genuine improvement that advances our relationship with life.' He goes on to say that forming partnerships with others is actually the best way for humans to do this. So with my selective view of the world, I read into his comments a reference to the ideas of meaning, of a strong sense of self, a sense of

personal power and hope. The notion of improvement suggests caring about life, having some meaning; and it also suggests both an ability to create change and the hope and belief that this is possible. We need to imagine some positive change to aim for it and are more likely to try for it if we think we have the ability to get there. Otherwise, why bother?

Relationships

I have asked people over and over again across countries and across cultures this question: 'What is it that gives your life meaning and purpose?' And over and over again the most often heard reply has been 'family and friends.'

The National Youth Survey 2005 conducted by Mission Australia asked young people what they value and got these responses: 77.8% of females and 65.8% of males said 'family relationships.' Second on the list was 'friends other than family.' There are sex differences and differences between indigenous and non-indigenous people, but these two responses still rate right up there for everyone.

In studying adolescent health, Benard and Marshall (2001) say that: 'For all health-risk behaviors, across all socioeconomic levels, family structures, and races and ethnicities, when teens feel connected to their families and when parents are involved in their children's lives, teens are protected.' They also found that just one school variable '...a feeling of connectedness to school' was consistently associated with better health amongst students. They argue that: 'Caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for participation have tremendous protective and connective powers to influence youth (and human) development.'

Relationships stands out as being a significant element for many people, and this fits with my experience of 30 years of people work, and fits also with many people's common sense and personal experience of the world. Some people do spend more time on their own, some people are very sociable, others are even needy, and some people learn to be loners. But for most of us, relationships with other people, in some form, matter.

I do however need to make another observation at this point. Can a person be resilient and not have meaningful relationships in their life? I believe so. While for most of us, relationships seem a central if not essential ingredient, people can flourish without it. For some, having meaning in life is most important, and this meaning does not have to come from relationships. For others, having a strong sense of self and being in charge of life seem to be the most essential ingredients. It seems as long as there are some elements of resilience operating in a person's life, then life itself can be good.

Participation

Like relationships, participation arises over and over again as a key dynamic. The website for the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People provides a huge amount of information about participation and how to create opportunities for young people to be involved in all aspects of society. The publication 'Research and resources about participation' says that: 'Participation allows a child or young person to "own" decisions that

are made about their lives.' And of course, 'owning' decisions suggests a sense of autonomy, a sense of agency, of being in charge, of personal power.

The 2002 Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (New Zealand) states a number of Principles of Youth Development among them being:

- Youth development is about young people being connected
- Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach
- Youth development happens through quality relationships.

Again, the elements of relationships, and looking for and expecting the best in people and helping that emerge stand out.

Hope

I return here to Len Syme who in 2003 in an address on 'Social Determinants of Health. The Community as an Empowered Partner' speaks of a Project he was involved with which was supposed to address '...cigarette smoking and other drug use, violence, poor school performance, sexual behaviour and so on...' He says that they made a decision instead to '...focus on the fundamental issues underlying all of these problems. We decided to focus on hope.'

Personal and societal assets

'Validating the Assets Approach' (2002) identifies 40 developmental assets, and these are grouped into external and internal assets. The external including things such as 'Family support', 'Positive peer culture' and 'High expectations.' The internal assets including things like: 'Achievement motivation', 'Personal power' and 'Self-esteem.' This paper tells us that a young person with a high number of assets: '... will tend to engage in few or no risky behaviors.' And this includes violence, depression, sexual intercourse and substance use.

Goodness

My last reference I leave to a person of eloquence and scholarly wisdom. A.C. Grayling has written a very worthwhile and esoteric book called 'What is good?' and the final words in his book are these: 'To the question "What is good?" then, the answer can only be: "The considered life – free, creative, informed and chosen, a life of achievement and fulfillment, of pleasure and understanding, of love and friendship; in short, the best human life in a human world, humanely lived."'

Grayling is a philosopher beyond anything that I could ever aspire to, and so I hope I am not drawing too a long a bow in seeing in his statement support for some of the elements of resilience. 'Free' and 'chosen' suggest a degree of efficacy or agency; what I am calling personal power. And the reference to 'love and friendship' certainly pertains to the element of 'meaningful relationships.'

And...

Perhaps my evidence is thin? I have quoted very little about the ingredient of 'A strong sense of self', although I do think it is implied throughout the research. I have no doubt that it is possible to drive trucks through the gaps in my evidence here about resilience. Be that is it

may, my aim in writing this article is as I said at the beginning, to add my comments to the discussion about an idea which has gained some popularity in the fields of youth, health, community and welfare work, and to help keep it alive and real as it does have something to offer us.

With all that then as some sort of evidence base the following takes a look at the value of the resilience framework in terms of how it can be applied.

A useable framework

Sometimes research, as useful as it is, just seems too big to take on board. A total of 40 assets ('Validating the Assets Approach.' 2003. Ibid), internal and external, can seem just too big to take on board on a day to day basis. Similarly a paper by Mission Australia 2005 identifies a total of 50 risk and protective factors in building resilience. This is all genuinely useful in the big picture and invaluable for social planners, but a front line worker may reasonably feel a little overwhelmed by so many variables. And some of them, such as 'Neighbourhood boundaries' or 'Caring school climate' to all intents and purposes are outside the control of the worker and the person they are working with. So what I have tried to do in developing this framework is to provide a series of meaningful principles or elements which can guide our thoughts and actions while maintaining the complexity of the ideas involved. What I have attempted in the following is to demonstrate just this, how the principles can translate into our everyday actions. I suggest that we can do this in two complementary ways.

Focus 1

In the lives of those we work with

Whether we work with individuals, couples, families, organizations or communities, we can seek to understand whether these elements are present or not, in the life of this person, in how this family lives, in how this organization functions, in how the members of this community relate to each other. To what extent do these elements need to be established or strengthened? And how do we do this?

Focus 2

In the relationships we develop with those we work with

We can ask ourselves as therapists, teachers, mentors, community workers, managers, colleagues....whatever...if the elements of resilience operate within the relationships we develop with individuals, with groups or organizations. We can ask ourselves if the relationship has meaning for all of us. We can ask how we know this. And we ask if we create hope and meaning in what we do together. We can ask: who is in control of what? And we can enquire of ourselves and others as to how we can actively contribute to the person in front of us increasing their personal power in a relationship where we may be in a position of power for example as a therapist, or a community worker. Particularly so if the person we are working with is sad and confused, or possibly mandated to see us, or both. And how can we ensure that when we work with a group or community which has been spiritually decimated, we work together to increase their individual and collective strength? And how do we ensure that meaningful hope is created for the future?

In youth work, health and community work and the related professions, we are often in a position of greater power in relation to those we work with, our clients. It is therefore up to us to ask these questions and to be vigilant as to whether the ingredients of resilience are genuinely active in all our work with those we seek to help, and who by the very nature of how we have made contact, may well be in great need and possibly at their most vulnerable.

Each focus is explored below.

Focus 1: In the lives of those we work with

With individuals: Are the elements of resilience present in this person's life?

As always, just how these questions are posed is a personal and situational choice, but the actual questions might include: how is this person thinking and feeling about themselves right now? Do they have meaning in their life? Are they in charge of themselves and their life? Do they have some worthwhile and uplifting relationships in their life? And if this person does not have meaningful relationships in their life, can we together, develop these? Or do we need to focus on other aspects of this person's life? Because the resilience framework is a guide as to where we might focus. It is not a checklist to be ticked off. If a person does not have meaningful relationships, then other dynamics can be strengthened.

With one person, as the contact develops, it may well become clear that their strengths, and possibly their concerns as well, lie within the elements of:

- Meaning
- Personal power
- Relationships.

And this is where the exploration goes.

With another person it may well become clear that relationships are not their focus, as they are solid in the person's life, or because at this moment, this element is not really within their grasp. To help this person grow as a person, the focus may well be on:

- Meaning
- Personal power
- Sense of self.

In each case the selection of which dynamics to explore is a joint decision and open to discussion. It is not a given and fixed thing but negotiated openly with the person. This is being true to the principles of resilience *within* the relationship with the person we are seeking to assist. This is discussed more fully in the next section which explores whether the resilience elements are active within the actual relationship we have with those we work with.

With families: Are the elements of resilience present in this family's life?

The approach taken in the following to look at the role of the resilience framework with families, is to name several of the elements and then comment on how that might be explored. As is often the case with this process, questions are the basis of this exploration. Questions can be a powerful basis of conversation. As with individuals, how these are asked and answered is a matter of what works for all involved. Both questions and answers can be part of an open discussion. The answers can be written or drawn and then discussed, or used as a springboard for discussion without the answers necessarily being revealed, or the answers might be taken away to be reflected on....endless ways.

With a focus on meaning

In this family, what does each person value? Does each person know what each of the other family members' values? How does what each person values fit, or not, with what each other member values? Are there values which are shared? What would it mean for this family to move to another city? Or country? What would you find difficult? What would you miss? What might you find exciting? And what could you offer to this new place? And to each other at that time?

With a focus on relationship

What does being a member of this family mean? How is each member of this family connected to each other? What is each person's role in the family? And how does each person relate to each of the others? In what ways is each person content, or frustrated by, or fulfilled within, or restrained by their role, their place in this family? What does it mean to be part of this family when there are difficulties? When there are tensions? How does this family create fun together?

With a focus on personal power

What decisions does each member of this family get to make? What does each person think about this? Is each person in charge of the decisions that are appropriate for their age and role? How are differences of opinion managed in this family? Who should be making what decisions about what things?

With a focus on hope

What does the future look like for this family as a whole? For each person in it? What hurdles does each person see along the way? How will they be managed? What does each person most want for that future? And what can each person most contribute to help make it real? And what happens if it turns out to be a different future to what is expected?

With organizations or with communities

Although the individual questions may vary, as may the strategies used to ask the questions, and the process on one occasion may be more formal, and on another more relaxed, the intention and fundamental question remains the same:

Are the elements of resilience present in how this organization functions?

In how this community functions?

Is power being held, used, distributed in ways everyone is happy with? Is each member of this organization/this community, leading the life they most want to lead? Making the contributions they most want to make? In touch with those they most want to be in touch with? How does the future look to everyone? What part can each person play in shaping this future? What part does each person want? What skills/talents/abilities can each person offer on this journey?

Focus 2: In the relationships we develop with those we work with

The second application of the framework is to explore the extent to which the principles of resilience are active ingredients in how we actually relate to those we work with. As before, there is fundamentally one question to be asked:

Are the elements of resilience reflected in how we work together?

All our work needs to be open to such scrutiny. A person may well be in contact with us because they need some sort of assistance at this point in their life. Whether they have been mandated or not, the need is no less real. If we really do believe that a person's life is in some way enhanced by having the elements of resilience active within it, then it follows that these same elements need to be present and apparent, in how we work together. This is equally true for the life of a family, and the functioning of an organization or a community. So similar to the process described above, we need to determine whether these elements are vibrantly active in the actual relationships we create. And again the actual form of this exploration can be varied: spontaneous discussion, reflection now or at a later moment, writing or drawing, a revealing or a keeping private, of part or all of what has occurred to a person. No matter what form they take, the questions which are asked may be something like the following: How useful to you is our work together? In what ways, large or small, has it made a difference to your life? What has been useful, and perhaps what has not been? Are we clear about what each of us brings to this work together? What is your part in this process? And what is mine? Have we got the balance right of each of us offering ideas and direction as to how we work together? Do we want to alter anything about how we work together?

And these questions can apply equally to individuals, couples, families, organizations, communities and our society as a whole.

Some final thoughts

Limitations of the framework

It is hardly a secret that how we are as individuals depends to a large extent on what we have inherited. And with our increasing understanding of such things, there is now some suggestion of a kind of 'default position' to which we naturally return. Okay, so we have tendencies. We can do nothing about these predisposing factors and we also know that our inherited capacities and incapacities interact with the environment to give us the sum total

of who we are. So it seems kind of obvious that it is most productive to focus on those things we can do something about. This is equally true of organizations and communities. Are these also organic entities heading in inevitable directions? It is not difficult to look and see that groups of people across the planet and across time, function quite differently. So perhaps things are not completely fixed and we can have some role in our futures, both as individuals and within the various groupings of which we are a part.

Too simple?

Is this framework too simple? Possibly. Seven ideas is hardly an intricately developed conceptual framework, and yet simple ideas can expand into much more complex approaches if we wish them to. The purpose of this framework is to provide a guide for further more complex thought and action about how we think of the lives of those we seek to help and the very process itself of trying to be helpful.

Enough evidence?

Is there enough evidence for these seven elements to comprise a framework? Is it enough to lay out these disparate thoughts and pieces of research and then collect certain aspect into a whole? Hard to say really. Yet these ideas stand out. They have been named here because they insistently and consistently appear over and over in research and in practice. So maybe it is not stretching a point too far to organise them into a working framework. And to say it again, this framework is a tool aiming to be of use to those who seek to be of some assistance to the world around us. And through the tool there may also be a contribution to keeping real and alive an idea of some considerable value.

How many ingredients does a person need?

It is probably impossible to answer this. There are so many 'non-standard' resilient people that it seems there really are many ways to be strong and have a good life. And in fact it is important that we communicate this clearly in our work. That, while for instance, relationships are important to many of us, by actively pursuing them they can become increasingly elusive (it is possible to try too hard and drive people away). It may also be self-defeating for a person if they place responsibility for their well-being in the hands of someone else through the vehicle of a relationship, and if the importance of that relationship gets out of balance. And for those who, for whatever reason, do not have meaningful relationships in their life, this element may take a back seat, and other elements become more important; a sense of meaning and purpose, or a strong sense of self, or of participation in their world around them. Equally, a person may not feel enormously powerful and yet have meaning in their life and a strong connection with others. While each of the ingredients matters, in reality the mix for each person may well be quite unique.

Self awareness

Of course all this is just words unless we breathe some life into them. Most people would agree that the ten commandments are a good idea but somehow lots of people still seem able to constantly ignore them. To help someone develop resilience and for us in the helping professions to monitor our own work requires a degree of insight and a certain amount of self-awareness. It requires an ability to be genuinely self-questioning and self-critical. There are few people who say to themselves: 'Yep. I was just disrespectful to that person and what I did has made them possibly just a little weaker than they were before.' It is hard to imagine

anyone doing anything as appalling as this deliberately so let's say that it happens unintentionally. And it does happen. The challenge for us to be self-critical is a considerable one. And a worthwhile one.

What is useful about a resilience framework is this:

- It is a useful starting point when we want to be helpful and are not sure (as workers, therapists, parents, friends, teachers ...) where to start
- It has application with individuals/families/couples/organizations/ communities and our society as a whole
- Equally it has application between each of these groups. It is a framework that makes sense across all the sorts of relationships people are likely to be part of; with friends, within families, within and between communities
- It is a useful framework that can be applied in overlapping ways; obviously therapists with their clients, community workers with communities; but also parents with each other, with their children, and teachers with those same children at school and with each other
- It can guide agencies and government departments as much as individual actions, in terms of what they focus on and what they fund for others to focus on
- It can direct our efforts in multiple overlapping ways; looking at meaning, helping a person strengthen their relationships, looking at ways for people to be more in charge of their lives
- The framework itself is respectful and invites those who use it to be in charge of how they use it. It is not in any way prescriptive, but open and inviting
- Equally it makes sense across all cultures and between cultures as there is enormous flexibility in how the elements might be enhanced
- Importantly, it provides an empirical base for action. That is to say, there is research evidence which tells us that enhancing these elements really does make a difference to people
- Importantly the idea of resilience has common sense appeal. Ask anyone what matters deeply to them in life and there is a very good chance they will reply 'friends and family.' Look around the world and look at the people we know and it is easy to see that most people want to be in charge of themselves and make their own decisions. (People can of course learn to be helpless but it is not the preferred condition for most people)
- The framework fits comfortably with any other conceptual framework
- It is accessible and useable when a person is faced with research which identifies a sometimes overwhelming number of relevant factors which impact on people's lives. Many of which are outside the control of both the worker and the person they are working with
- Resilience does change over time and is contextual. Having said this it continues to be worth our attention as it can guide our actions on a daily basis and encourage us as workers and as simple citizens of the planet, to be mindful of what we look for in others and ourselves, and what we do to bring that forth in ourselves and in others
- And finally and importantly this framework is democratic. It is understandable and can be acted on by every citizen.

So! Resilience. Is it just another buzz word?

Yes, it probably is. But clearly I also think it is an idea of value. At this point in time it can give us some clear guidelines for thinking about how to increase the wellbeing of individuals,

families, couples, organizations and communities. This paper is not intended to stand the test of a court of law nor a university lab. It simply seeks to be useful. When we get new information we can put that on the table too and start working with it. For now I am happy to run with the idea of resilience and modify it or substitute something else when we start to learn more, and I will do so carefully so as to make sure I am not embracing another new buzz word but looking at the worth and relevance of new evidence and ideas when they come around. In the meantime, resilience is a useful idea.

Pete Slattery

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