

Demystifying Psychological Resilience

The following was written by Esme Steele the original of the article can be viewed [here](#)

Enhancing Personal Performance in the face of adversity

“More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person’s level of resilience will determine who succeeds and fails. That’s true in the cancer ward, it’s true in the Olympics and it’s true in the boardroom.” Coutou

Social unrest, natural disasters, mass unemployment, postponement of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games, impeachment of the US President, royal resignations, terrorist attacks and that pandemic. The multitude of challenges presented in 2020 have been indicative of the fast-changing, taxing and increasingly stressful modern world we now live in. Unsurprisingly, epidemiological studies suggest that the majority of people experience at least one potentially traumatic event in their lifetime (1). Why can some individuals withstand, even thrive in the face of multiple crises, whilst others fall apart at the slightest hardship? Psychological resilience.

Psychological resilience has arguably never been so important in such a restless and unforgiving environment. We now face times of uncertainty on less-familiar international scales, on top of a multitude of everyday personal confronts.

Originating from the Latin term *resilire* ‘to leap back’, resilience has become a buzzword in multiple realms of psychology, including the military, education, business and sport. However, with increased popularity has come increased perplexity. How can we define psychological resilience? Does

it lead to sustainable high performance and success? Can we develop it? This blog aims to demystify the phenomenon of psychological resilience by dispelling common myths and offering practical answers to these questions by drawing upon lessons from elite sport.

What is Psychological Resilience?

Psychological resilience, also known as mental fortitude, is broadly defined as an individual's ability to adapt, overcome and bounce back stronger from misfortunes or negative life events resulting in suffering or trauma (2). The development of resilience can help you bounce back from such events, protect you against mental illness and boost your personal performance. There are two core concepts to psychological resilience, firstly the precursor of adversity. Adversities faced are not just life altering disasters or tragedies but modest disruptions on a smaller scale, which most of us encounter on a day-to-day basis. For example, falling ill and losing a loved one are very different events but just because one event happens more frequently does not take away from their adversarial value (3). Secondly the consequence of positive adaptation, which is an individual's ability to return to personal functioning and a state of positive wellbeing (4). There are two main types of psychological resilience, robust resilience and rebound resilience.

Rebound resilience is a short-term bounce-back quality characterised by minor or temporary disruptions to an individual's well-being and performance when under pressure. Therefore, rebound resilience is relevant to short term adversities such as failing an exam or other temporary minor disruptions. However, many larger scale adversities take months or years to heal from, such as a career changing injury for an athlete. This is where the development of robust resilience can help one withstand faced pressures, maintain performance and even result in positive adaptations (5). An

example of robust resilience is the astonishing comeback of Michael Jordan after his retirement from basketball in 1993, following the murder of his father. Jordan took two years out, before returning to lead the Bulls to three more championships.

Dispelling Common Myths

“You either have resilience or you don’t.”

Historically many academics believed resilience was a trait, something you are born with. However, the phenomenon is now understood as a dynamic psychosocial process involving ongoing person-situation transactions (2). This means your resilience is constantly changing because it is not a static capability but an ever evolving, attentional and deliberate effort (6). Many environmental and situational factors affect resilience and therefore a person’s resilience will alter event to event. You may be able to bounce back quickly and effectively from one event but suffer longer after a different one. There are a number of personality characteristics, such as high self-esteem, optimism and high personal standards that act as dispositional traits to resilience.

“I survived therefore I am resilient.”

As previously mentioned, a key aspect of psychological resilience is having a positive adaptation outcome. Hence, merely surviving an adverse event is not the same as being resilient to one. A survivor may be consumed with a bitter, victim mentality, failing to discover their inner equilibrium or inner peace. In contrast a resilient person will experience personal growth in pursuit of their goals in response (7).

“Resilience is solely reactive.”

Psychological resilience can be reactive (rebound resilience) or proactive (robust resilience) and is therefore crucial

before, during and after stressful situations (8). Maintaining current relationships, building new ones, pursuing goals, taking risks and actively trying to enjoy life can contribute to proactive resilience, resulting in being better equipped to deal with unexpected adversities (7).

“Elite athletes are superhuman.”

Elite performers, including elite athletes are just ordinary people who do extraordinary things, almost imperfect geniuses. No one has a complete resistance to adversity and often those who seem most resilient have endured great suffering (5). In fact, there's substantial evidence stating multiple Olympians and Paralympians have encountered adversity-related experiences, traumatic accidents, notably loss of a parent, parental divorce or difficulties at school. Such events have ultimately been essential to successful performance; due to the athlete's post-traumatic growth and deep-rooted need to succeed, their sport becomes their compensatory mechanism (9).

Take Away Strategies

Some people have particular personal qualities that protect them from the consequences of adversity and stress, including; strong self-esteem, planning skills, recognition of available support, high energy and a sense of spirituality (4). However, regardless of these anyone can become an active participant in enhancing personal psychological resilience through five main strategies.

Strategy 1. Control the Controllable

Focus on what you can control, if a situation can be changed then take steps to do so. If not then by switching your attentional focus to features of the adversity you can control, you allow yourself to bounce back and move forward. Focussing your

energy and efforts on the future, not the past, allows you to invest in your emotional adaptability and emotional agility (7).

Tip: Identify aspects of your life to be grateful for and write them down.

Strategy 2. Acceptance & Adaptability

Resilient people understand that bad things happen, and suffering is part of every human existence. When hit by an adverse advent don't feel discriminated against but try to accept that the event has happened and try to move forward in an adaptable way. Those who are adaptable and not wedded to a set plan are able to take their own initiative and are not shaken when their course is altered.

Example: Dame Katherine Grainger DBE won six Olympic silver medals in rowing before acquiring her gold in London 2012. Her journey to gold required multiple adaptations.

Strategy 3. Personal Stability & Support

Resilience is not developed in social isolation; the role of others and social interactions are crucial in creating a facilitative environment. Creating a web of positive personal relationships acts as a significant protective factor against stressful times (8). Aim to maintain current relationships and forge new ones. □

Tip: Be critical of which relationships bring positivity and support.

Strategy 4. Change Negative Narratives

Understand, manage and control negative emotions instead of seeking to eradicate them. They are constant companions to be utilised and trained. Identify your negative emotion associated with a certain event. Then ask yourself the following: How does this affect me? Why do I care? How can I change this? By answering these questions, you create a challenge mindset and have the capacity to change negative thoughts into positive ones.

Tip: When being self-critical, ask yourself “Is this helping me or harming me?”

Strategy 5. Mind Over Movement

LeBron James, Novak Djokovic, Kobe Bryant, Kerri Walsh and Tom Daley are just a few elite athletes that advocate the integration of mental skills training and mindfulness into daily routine in order to enhance mental well-being, resilience and performance. Mindfulness is the intentional focus of one’s attention on the cognitive, sensory, mental and

emotional aspects of the present moment, through the use of guided imagery and controlled breathing (10). This distinct attention and awareness is built upon the ability to observe where your mind wanders to and accept associated feelings.

Tip: Rome wasn't built in a day. Mindfulness training will take time and persistence to master.