

BOING! Retreat

28th June 2020

Talk 1: Resilience: History and Definition

Today we are going to look at Resilience. And as always, I want to start with a definition. “Resilience” has become one of those catch-words that everyone is using and that is becoming so watered down as to not mean much of anything at all. We are going to stick today with the psychological definition, as used by practitioners and researchers in the field of resilience studies. There are various ways that the word is described, but the idea is clear. To quote one such definition: “Resilience is the skill of being able to bounce back when knocked down by the adversities of life, often returning stronger than before.” Sounds easy, right?

In order to understand what this definition really means, we need to look at its history, right back to Freud. Freud’s big thing was that issues in adulthood can all be traced back to unpleasant experiences in childhood. This assumption was still in play around the 1940s, when a guy called John Bowlby, who was a freudian psychoanalyst, became a proponent of evidence-based scientific research, which was lacking in freudian psychology. He began researching the risk factors that would lead children to become mentally ill or otherwise dysfunctional in adulthood, exploring the freudian assumptions, but seeking a concrete scientific theory. His interest was in addressing the risk factors in children to prevent the dysfunction in adulthood. He worked initially with children during WWII, including war orphans and children evacuated from London, which pointed him toward his eventual development of attachment theory, which explores at the consequences of the early loss of a

mothering figure. This was one of the roots of the new fields of child psychology and early childhood development.

Around the 1960's a researcher called Normal Garmezy continuing this line of research, explored the connection between childhood experience and adult mental illness. He worked with adults living with schizophrenia, and later the children of adults living with schizophrenia. He noted that amongst children with the same risk factors, the same predictors, and the same prognosis, some of the children would always end up mentally healthy anyway. He wanted to know how these children were different, and observed a new characteristic in them which he eventually called "resilience." However, he did not yet know exactly what "resilience" was or where it came from. His studies shifted then from risk factors and how to prevent them, to what he called "Protective Factors" and whether or not they could be learned.

During this time, in the mid 50's Child Development researcher Emmy Warner had already begun a long-term study, following 698 children – the entire birth population of the island of Kauai for 1955. She was also interested in correlating risk factors with teen and adult dysfunctionality. The study spanned 32 years, collected a huge amount of data, and her results were published in 1989. She found, as Garmezy did, but with much more and controlled data, that of the children qualifying as "at risk" for adult problems, a full third of them defied the prognosis and became "competent, confident, and caring young adults."

Her research not only confirmed Garmezy's ideas of "resilience" and "protective factors," but with the long-term data, she was able to identify what some of these Protective Factors are. Two of her most significant findings were that resilient children had a strong connection with a non-parent adult, such as a mentor, a pastor, a teacher, or a social worker;

and, that these successful children had what is called an “Internal Locus of Control.” This means that they believed that they had control over their lives, as opposed to external circumstances controlling them. (An “external locus of control” would be the belief that I am at the mercy of external circumstances, and there is nothing I can do against the adversities I face.)

Around the same time, starting in the late 1960’s a psychologist named Martin Seligman who was studying depression made an accidental discovery that led to the eventual development of the theory of “Learned Helplessness.” “Seligman developed the theory further, finding learned helplessness to be a psychological condition in which a human being or an animal *has learned to act or behave helplessly in a particular situation*—usually after experiencing some inability to avoid an adverse situation—*even when it actually has the power to change its unpleasant or even harmful circumstance*. Seligman saw a similarity with severely depressed patients, and argued that clinical depression and related mental illnesses result in part from *a perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation.*”

This research indicates that a person’s perceived external locus of control can be learned – and therefore also unlearned. Seligman went on to establish the field of Positive Psychology, looking at what goes right in people rather than what goes wrong. This, in addition to work by George Bonanno (a leading researcher in grief and resilience at Columbia University) which highlights the importance of how a person frames experience (as either traumatic or a challenge to be learned from, which led to his use of the phrase Potentially Traumatic Experience, or PTE), has led to the relatively recently established understanding that positive traits and learned skills are the essential factor of resilience, rather than the risk factors or external events that take place in a person’s life.

Why is it important to know this history? So that you don't have to just take it from me: whatever your beliefs or fears or habits of expectations may be regarding your ability to survive Potentially Traumatic Events, and to thrive afterwards, there is plenty of research showing that you can learn what you don't currently know and you can unlearn whatever may keep you back. Your personal history and the unpleasant experiences of your life are not the predictors of your future. Your determination to learn the needed skills are, and even if they don't come naturally to you, you *can* learn them. And today we will be exploring some ways of learning some of these skills.

So what are these Predictors and Protective Factors?

Some of the main predictors of resilience (from Child Development)

- genetics
- positive attitude
- optimism
- emotional regulation
- internal locus of control
- positive framing
- living according to one's values

Positive Psychology's Preventative Factors

- gratitude
- kindness
- hope
- bravery (acting with mental, moral, or physical strength *despite* difficulty or fear)
- social connections
- attitude of exploration and adaptability

What is interesting about these two lists is that apart from genetics, all of these characteristics can be trained. Martin Seligman, the father of Positive Psychology, posited three general elements to what he called "Authentic Happiness" (a generalization from his

resilience research) (2002): Positive Emotion, Engagement, and Meaning. Let's divide the characteristics of resilience into these categories:

Positive Emotion

- positive attitude/optimism
- positive framing
- gratitude
- kindness
- hope
- bravery (Acting with mental, moral, or physical strength despite difficulty or fear)

Engagement

- internal locus of control (leads to action)
- emotional regulation (enables appropriate action)
- social connections

Meaning

- attitude of exploration and curiosity (seeking meaning, open to new discoveries)
- living according to one's values

This breakdown makes the prospect of preparing for adversity and surviving through it more manageable, and we are going to be looking at each of these three categories today. How can meditation increase the positivity of our emotions? How can we facilitate and improve our engagement in the world? How can mindfulness add or reveal personal meaning in our lives?

In order to answer these questions, we need to go back to some more definitions.

Like the word *resilience*, the words *mindfulness* and *meditation* have become so broadly used that they might mean completely different things to different people. What *I* mean by these words is based on Shinzen Young's definitions in his meditative system called Unified Mindfulness.

Mindful Awareness is a particular way of paying attention to the present moment. This “particular way” is defined as paying attention using three distinct but co-operative learnable skills:

- concentration
- sensory clarity
- equanimity.

Let me define these: *concentration* is the ability to focus on what you deem to be relevant for as long as you wish to focus on it. It need not be a single, small object of focus, and it need not be prolonged, unbroken focus. We will get more into that when we actually do the practices.

Sensory clarity is being able to detect and distinguish the details of what you are concentrating on; tracking in real time if and how it changes, what it is made of, and so on.

Equanimity is the ability to allow whatever is happening internally to happen without trying to change it, hang on to it, or push it away. Notice that this refers to *internal* experience, not external. If you see a child about to step into the street, you **do not** simply allow the child to walk into the street without trying to stop it. What you **do**, is allow your fear or self-doubt to arise internally without trying to push it away or change it, which will free up your energy and attention to take the appropriate external action.

So Concentration, Clarity and Equanimity, often referred to in shorthand as CC&E, are skills you can learn and intentionally use when experiencing your life. When you do, this is called *Mindful Awareness*.

Meditation is when you intentionally do something to either train these skills or use them in a specific situation. So the meditation technique of observing your breathing, for example, trains concentration through the way you continually bring your attention back to

the breath; it trains sensory clarity as you observe more and more detail about the movement and change and characteristics of the breath; and it trains equanimity because you are continually allowing other sensory stimuli to occur without being caught up in them or fighting with them, while you maintain focus on the breath. This is one example of meditation used for training.

Alternatively, you can intentionally apply CC&E to, say, a challenging situation: You use concentration to focus on dealing with the issue, without being distracted by fearful emotions which might interfere with clear thinking. You use Sensory Clarity to notice the manifestations of the fearful emotions and to distinguish them from the physical adrenaline coursing through your body (which may help you to focus or act), and equanimity enables you to allow these unpleasant fear sensations to be present but not interfere with your ability to think and act. This is meditation being used to deal with a specific situation. And training and application of course overlap. They are often both happening at the same time.

Perhaps you already begin to see how meditation – the intentional cultivation and application of these three skills – might aid in the development of resiliency.

At this point, I want to recommend a book from which I learned much of what I have to say today. It's called "Mind your Life: How Mindfulness Can Build Resilience and Reveal Your Extraordinary." It's written by Meg Salter, and it covers what we're talking about today in more detail and with specific instructions and suggestions for building your own practice. I'll put the book info in the chat box along with other resources later.

So back to the question: how can meditation help build resilience? Well, for starters, meditation develops the skills of Concentration, Clarity, and Equanimity. *Any* meditation technique will do that, whether it's counting your breaths, chanting a mantra, feeling your

feet as you walk in the woods, or intentionally wishing happiness on people you know.

Therefore, a byproduct of any mindfulness practice is that it will assist with clear thinking, which can lead to more faith in your own ability to affect situations; meditation will begin to regulate emotions through equanimity with what is unpleasant, because things learned in one area of life tend to overflow into others; and finally, because meditation techniques are explorative, they will develop curiosity and an interest in learning and self-discovery and a willingness to look at difficult experiences. So even if we weren't going to address any of the three categories of Protective Factors, simply meditating regularly would improve your chances of successfully managing adverse situations that arise in your life.

But we can go further than this and use our three skills to specifically work on some of these Factors. We're going to start this morning on the Positive Emotions category. We can cultivate specific positive emotions, and we can raise the baseline level of our emotional outlook so that we generally are more positive and more optimistic. We will do this by practicing a family of techniques called Nurture Positive. (After lunch we'll look at the other two Protective Factors.)

Before we do that, though, we'll take some time for meditation in motion, such as walking meditation or stretching or yoga meditation. You can also use this time to take a bio break or grab a snack. Whatever you do, though, try to maintain mindful awareness as you do it. Meet back here at 10:25 for instruction and guidance in the Nurture Positive technique.