

Developing emotional intelligence



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Essay Title: What is emotional resilience and how does it develop? What might the consequences be for someone for who the process is disturbed?

Emotional resilience is defined as an individual's ability to cope with adversity and stress. The ability to respond and overcome life's difficulties embodies belief, capabilities, abilities, characteristics, attitude and traits of a person that is developed or hindered from childhood. Being resilient means you are flexible in your approach to problems and the consequence and impact on the person's sense of self is temporary.

Being resilient is a quality of attitude a person brings to their experience of life. It is a self developed ability that comes from learning ways of coping that are unique to them, cultivated through the process of trial and error. Developing this type of attitude toward life takes the willingness to risk failure to find out what works and doesn't work for you.

Science has long tried to identify the source of the resiliency factor in humans. Some have concluded that resiliency is developed by nature of genetics, some believe it is taught. Friedrich Nietzsche (1888) said, " That which doesn't kill me, makes me stronger." It is possible that resilience is learned, but it cannot be taught.

Whilst people differ in their inborn ability to handle life's stresses, resilience can be cultivated by strengthening your inner self and fortify self belief in what is possibly for you in your ability to handle life's difficulties. The implications of this are massive as those who are born into dysfunctional and violent environments are not destined to be emotionally crippled as a result.

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In a ground-breaking research on resilience sociologist Emmy Werner, Ph. D., of the University of California, (2001) showed that about a third of kids seemed to be unaffected by poverty, alcoholism and abuse in they encountered in their environments. The remaining two-thirds were found to be troubled as teens, typically turning to petty crime, but by the time they reached their 30s and 40s, they had pulled themselves together, determined to not repeat their parents' lives.

Werner discovered that within the percentage of children that faced very adverse conditions such as perinatal stress, chronic poverty and family environments that were engulfed in the chronic discord of parental alcoholism or mental illness. Although during their teens there was evidence of being negatively affected, as they grew away from their parents and into adulthood, something changed to what Werner and Smith called “vulnerable, but invincible.”

Over the course of the study, the participants were regularly checked on until they reached the age of 40. It was also noted that the high-risk category participants began to do better as they got older. Werner discovered that many of the participants who initially experienced difficulties when they were teenagers such as mental health problems and pregnancies, had in fact turned out to become successful, functioning adults by the time they reached mature adulthood.

The participants were thriving despite their early circumstances. Although surrounded by potentially debilitating “risk factors,” Werner and Smith’s decades-long study showed that, although an innate capacity for resiliency

helps, it is never too late to develop protective factors to bounce back from adversity.

The most common protective factors cited were reasoning ability, emotional support outside the immediate family, inner direction or a internal locus of control, autonomy or being able accomplish tasks alone, sociability which embodies empathy, having high expectations for themselves and seizing of opportunities.

Each person's development and growth is influenced by three kinds of learning: self managed experience, modelling and directed by others.

According to Abraham Maslow (1976) in his *continental-divide principle* where he stated that, " I use this principle," he wrote, " to describe the fact that stress will break people altogether if they are in the beginning too weak to stand distress, or else, if they are already strong enough to take the stress in the first place, that same stress, if they come through it, will strengthen them, temper them, and make them stronger."

Developing resiliency, even if this process is disturbed, is possible when the person is self motivated and self managed. When we are young our minds are developing and we are in our formative stages neurologically. These stages can be defined as: the imprint period, from birth to about age 7 years old, the modelling period from 7-14 years old, and the socialisation period, from about 14-21 years old.

During the imprint period, up to age 7, our minds have only a few ways to filter information as it comes in through your senses. Think about the innocence of a child or how a child's mind is like a sponge and is imprinted

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very easily. In the modelling period, from 7 - 14 years old, the child makes choices about who to model. This is the period of hero-worship, where kids idolize Harry Potter, sports figures, parents, TV and movie stars, rock stars, older brothers or sisters, the more popular of their peers, and so on, and then adopt parts of their values from these heroes. In the socialisation period, from ages 14-21, the young adult begins to adopt social, sexual and personal values and is less likely to adopt something just because someone else is doing it.

In the imprint stages, safety is the essential directive used by the unconscious mind in choosing what to adopt. The unconscious part of our minds is governed by this directive of safety and protection. This means that beliefs and attitudes of others observed will become hardwired as synaptic pathways in the unconscious mind. Young children carefully observe, model and download information offered by parents and caregivers directly into their unconscious minds with no critical evaluation of whether this behaviour is resourceful or not.

Another form of conditioning is directed by others through repetition of taught lessons, rules and instructions on how to think, feel and do. This can inhibit and disturb the development of resiliency which can result in the person becoming stuck in fixed patterns and the inability to adapt.

This inability is a form of learned helplessness. While learned helplessness as a concept is strongly linked to animal psychology and behaviour, it can also be applied to situations involving humans and has contributed greatly to understanding depression. This concept has challenged behaviourism

approach that what is conditioned derives from what is rewarded and what is punished.

The concept of learned helplessness was discovered accidentally by psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven F. Maier (1967) who observed this phenomenon in dogs who were repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulus and instead of attempting to escape, the dog stops trying to avoid the stimulus and resigns to it even when an opportunity to escape was presented.

Having demonstrated learned helplessness in a number of animal species the effects can also be seen in people and can be associated with several different psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and phobias. For example, a woman who feels trapped in an abusive relationship may internalize their partner's abusive behaviour toward them to be about themselves such as they are not good enough, ugly or worthless and do not seek help when it's readily available. The conditioning doesn't have to be negative reinforcement to condition helplessness. For example, a parent who coddles their child and encourages unhealthy attachment to them to the point that the child develops an aversion to strangers or crippling shyness they become helpless with their reliance on the parent to protect them. When people believe they have no control over their current situation they begin to behave in a helpless manner and subsequently, their inaction leads to them overlooking opportunities for change.

Self managed learning essentially stems from curiosity, willingness and is derived through experimentation with adaptability. Adaptation is the way of

survival in nature as well as among people. We are not born resilient. If nothing happens to us to challenge us, we fail to grow as individuals and develop the necessary attitude for resiliency.

Resilient people respond to disruptive change forced on them in a manner as if they had chosen to be that way. If a child were not allowed to develop resiliency traits by well-meaning parents and teachers who believe they have to train their child to think, feel and act a certain way, the child's inherent curiosity for experimentation through trial and error will be disturbed. As a result, the child grows up with rigid sets of rules of behaviour which decrease their ability to cope with life's challenges.

Most parents want their children to grow up to be happy, healthy and resilient adults. They don't want their children to turn out 'bad'. This can lead to the child learning to behave in order to feel loved and accepted. Because the child strives to please their parents and be the 'good child', it can result in them being unable to cope well in the world. These standards are sets of rules taught or modelled by the parent which can form inner prohibitions of values and beliefs which can subsequently passed down from generation to generation.

When parents raise children to not be bad, they discourage the child from expressing emotions and asking questions that could lead to a greater understand of their abilities and capability to handle difficulty. The child learns to behave in such a way to receive love, hugs, acceptance and praise. This can result in the child becoming emotionally handicap outside of their family structured environment as they meet difficulty with their limiting

repertoire of acceptable responses and unable to cope with rapid change, unexpected difficulties and extreme crisis.

When a person believes themselves to be bad or unable to cope they become victimized by their life and the implications they apply to their inability to cope. Herein lays the opportunity for growth to develop strengths, traits and attitudes of resiliency. For those who were raised to be good and obedient, developing resiliency requires stepping outside their comfort zone and learning to be more negative, selfish, angry, self appreciating and vulnerable. Basically, it's learning everything that they were taught to wilfully avoid by consequence of punishment or withdrawal of approval.

If a person gets stuck in victimisation pattern, they accumulate failed experience as their proof that they are not capable to overcome life's challenges. Their self belief deteriorates in direction proportion to their ability to handle strain.

Locus of Control as a principle was originated by Julian Rotter in the 1950's. The principle considers the tendency of people to believe that control resides internally within them, or externally, with others or the situation. This basically is the difference between if a person feels largely responsible for their life, or whether they feel that controlled by external forces. As a spectrum preference, some people will have wholly internal or external locus of control whilst many will have a balance between both views. This fluctuation may depend on the situation or environmental influence on the person such as internal at home but external at work.

People who believe in their own ability to control and influence the world around them are considered to have high internal locus of control. They feel a sense of responsibility and ownership over their fate and outcomes in their life will lead them to potential successes or failures. People who feel that their lives are somehow out of their own control tend to be more passive, to let other people make decisions for them, to not express their feelings or opinions.

Rotter (1990) describes the internal locus of control as:

“ The degree to which persons expect that reinforcement or an outcome of their behaviour is contingent on their own behaviour or personal characteristics.”

This belief in their ability to influence outcomes attributes to their feeling of self reliance, self esteem and confidence. They will tend to be more flexible in approaching difficulties and when faced with perceived or real failure, they see it as a temporary setback that provides valuable feedback on how to proceed. This self-motivating trait provides persistent and consistent action that is essential to success. Those with an internal locus of control see the world through a more adaptive perspective. They believe that their personal abilities combined with hard work will lead to positive outcomes. This makes them more likely to meet challenges and succeed in their future endeavours. Even if their actions do not result in a favourable outcome they intended, the belief that they can succeed greatly aids their psychological well-being.

In contrast, people with a high external locus of control believe they have little or no influence or control over things in their life. This may extend to a belief that others are in control and they must obey.

Rotter describes the external locus of control as:

“ The degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement or outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable.”

With such beliefs, people will tend to be more fatalistic, passive and submissive in life. Life happens to them and there is very little they can do about that. If they succeed at something, they attribute this to a fluke or luck rather than their own efforts. Failures are taken personally and become identified with making them effectively permanent part of their self concept. As these patterns become engrained in their identity, expectations become bleak as similar outcomes are foreseen. This makes individuals less likely to work to reach their full potential due to the motivational, emotional, and cognitive deficits it creates. This affects their ability to be resilient during difficult times and become more likely to suffer from depression and other ailments because they believe their actions cannot improve their current position.

This demonstrates how people thrive in difficult situations reflect internal attitudes and beliefs described as an internal locus of control. These attitudes and beliefs are internally referenced provide self-managing traits and characteristics that embody resiliency. In contrast, people who are externally referenced go numb, feel victimized or project their feelings of

inadequacies onto others. Failures become fatal and featured theme in their life.

As we grow up and develop a sense of ourselves we anticipate our ability to be effective in situations based on our personal history to do so. Those who feel powerless and victimized by life will feel attacked the inevitable changes of daily living. If your inner resources are not developed you will tend to suffer more and cope less. This feeds into your intentions and actions as an expectation and results in limiting and restricting themselves based upon the past experience which contaminates their present moment thoughts and feelings. The future becomes coloured with the failures of yesterday and their experience of life becomes narrower and more constrained. This continually feeds into and inhibits the person's emotional opinion of themselves tainting their self concept. Their self esteem is therefore dependent on things that they never had any influence or control over.

Resiliency means being responsible for yourself, your thoughts, feelings and behaviours and believing in your ability and capabilities to influence and achieve positive outcomes. In the face of setbacks, difficulties and crisis points, the more internally directed and self managed the person is the better they will be at thriving in conditions and with changes.

The modern world is filled with uncertainty and change. These changes come with an emotional price. The currency is your energy you invest in either fighting the change or flowing with change. Resiliency gives you the ability to get out of your own, step into an empowering posture where you feel capable of handling anything that life throws at you. Change is inevitable

and failure is not fatal. Change requires learning throughout your life and learning to let go of the past. To facilitate the emotional price of change, you learn to grow through life and challenges and transform trauma into challenges.

People coping with any type of loss need an inner strength of belief in themselves. This healthy regard for themselves provides a strong foundation for bounce-back-ability needed in order to overcome difficulty. Resilient people learn from mistakes and failures. They accept praise, recognition as legitimate but are not attached to these types of external ego reinforcements in order to get by. The ability to handle adversities is determined by the ability to be self-appreciating. This allows the resilient person to be independent of the good and bad opinions of others.

This means they find value and benefit as seeds to all adversity. Losing your job through no fault of your own can be extremely distressing and the loss can wear down on you. Resilient people rebound from adversity quickly and orientate on new potentials and opportunities instead of ruminating on the loss. Even if they haven't yet provided a solution to their current situation, they take the best action they can think of and then evaluate the results of that action. Based on this they refine their action and either refine or repeat. This persistence allows them to develop, grow, thrive and survive life's challenges.

Although resiliency cannot be taught, it can be learned through development of skills, attitudes, beliefs and value-based living. Even those who have had their development process of resiliency disrupted can learn how to overcome

with the right mindset. This begins the moment you make the choice to begin to live life according to what you want instead of what you have been told to want. It begins when you begin to live life according to your own standards, instead of those you inherited by your family. It begins the moment you define yourself based on your own ideas of who you are, who you can be instead of who you were told you are and what you are able to do.

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