

# Building Personal Resilience ©

Dr Neil Preston  
Organisational Psychologist - PsyOpus

## What is resilience?

There are many definitions of resilience but for the purposes of this paper I will use Norman Garmezy’s definition. Known as “the founder of research in resilience” Garmezy defines resilience as “not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event” (Garmezy, 1991a). Garmezy when studying resilient and vulnerable children found that those who were resilient were not “heroic” as such, but displayed “functional adequacy (the maintenance of competent functioning despite an interfering emotionality) as a benchmark of resilient behavior under stress” (Garmezy, 1991a). So what are these *functional adequacies* that build resilient people?

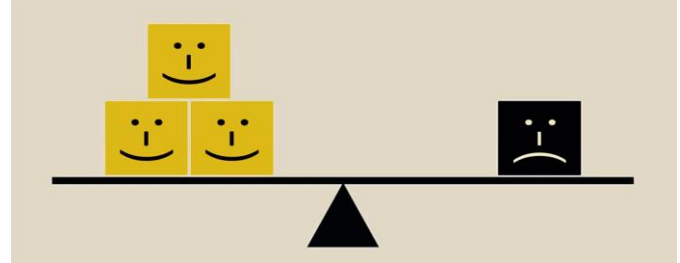
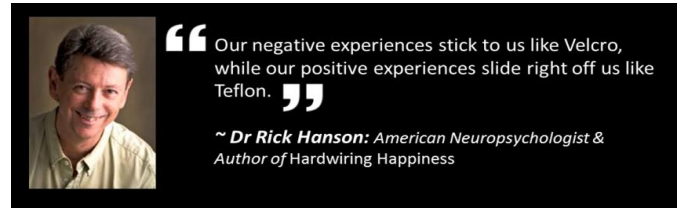
## Skills towards resilience

What is noted in the literature is that resilience is not a characterological trait but more accurately, conditions which surround a person as well as their outlook and internal response to adversity that determine resilience. As such resilience can be a skill that can be fostered in any individual. Those who are resilient tend to deal with perceived adverse situations in a positive and creative way. Resilient people are able to transform challenges into an opportunity, absorb learnings which come from setbacks, and to quickly recover with minimum physical and mental cost. Resilient people tend to have lower levels of depression and anxiety, develop personally as a result of adversity, and harness an inner strength that helps them rebound from adversity.

## Negativity bias

Some theorists argue that we all have a well-intended learning disability. In other words, we over learn negative and noxious experience and underlearn positive ones. Rick Hanson a neuropsychologist once quipped that “our negative experiences stick to us like

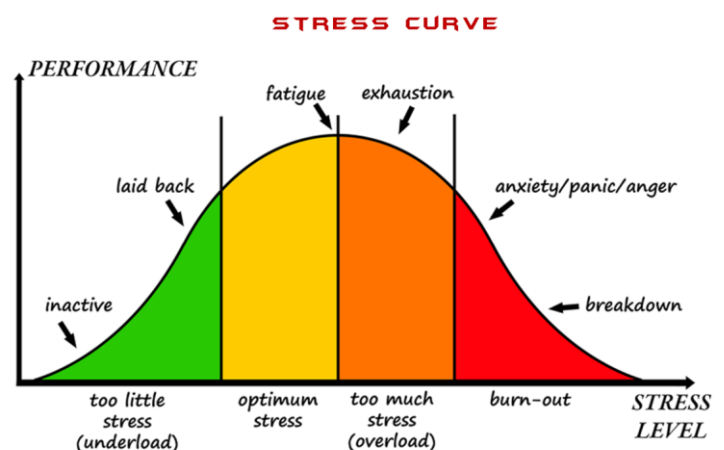
Velcro, while our positive experiences slide right off us like Teflon.”



One negative experience can outweigh the learnings from many positive ones. Some argue that we are “biologically wired” from an evolutionary point of view to respond more deeply to threatening events – remember the old *flight, fright, freeze, fight response* so embedded in our psychological and physiological responses to threat.

## Meeting our limits – the stress curve

Life is stressful and in fact it must be in order to be motivated to act. Too little stress (also known as U stress) can lead to depression, boredom and disengagement. Beyond this is optimal stress where our systems are not overwhelmed but sufficient to engage positively and effectively with what is required of us to do.



When stress becomes chronic and we are unable to control or change the situation we can become overloaded and exhausted. Beyond this state is prolonged *flight – fright – freeze – fight* responses that if not relieved, can lead to burnout and breakdown. Knowing where you are at on the stress curve and how

to alleviate it may be one such skill in building resilience.

### **The five protective factors for resilience**

For simplicity sake, I have identified 5 protective factors for building resilience. Some are skills and some are dispositions but we could all consider these if we want to remain resilient in our work and life.

1) **Locus of Control.** Those who remain resilient tend to have an internal locus of control, that is they believe that the consequences of their behaviour are in their control (Rotter, 1966). Believing that they can be in control in changing situations and events and seeing difficult events as challenging, helps build a sense of “self-efficacy” – that is a *belief in one’s own skills and abilities*.

2) **Emotional Regulation.** The famous “marshmallow experiment” asked pre-schoolers to delay their immediate gratification for a marshmallow that was sitting right in front of them. If they could delay their impulse to eat the marshmallow they would be rewarded with more upon return of the experimenter after leaving the room to the child’s own devices. What the marshmallow test revealed in longitudinal studies is that children who could regulate their inner emotional response to immediate gratification, performed better academically, earned more money, stayed in longer relationships, and had lower criminal behaviour! Wow just by saying no to a marshmallow! How we regulate our inner emotional world matters in building resilience.



3) **Not Catastrophising.** Not seeing stress as inherently bad for you is protective. Ruminating over negative events and attributing them only to external forces can amplify chronic stress – and we know what this does considering our stress curve mentioned above.

4) **Spiritual and Religious Resources.** Interestingly having a meaning and purpose beyond your self can be protective. Having a world view that extends beyond your own private self can often put difficult and tragic circumstances into a wider context of meaning. Human’s cannot survive long mentally without meaning – a strong meaning system can “relativise” your difficulties. In essence, spiritual resources are the practice of hope.

5) **The Practice of Mindfulness and Heartfulness.** This factor is linked to catastrophising. Mindfulness or what psychologists call *meta-cognition* allows us to watch our thoughts, emotions and internal dialogue without over identifying them. It is important to understand that you are having angry thoughts rather than *being* angry. Not overidentifying our very selves with our thoughts, feelings and internal commentaries can be very protective. Heartfulness is the moral imperative not to engage in “attack and defence” communication styles when threatened. It means to take a step back, pause and to resist our desire to lash out. Not to be entangled in imitating the aggression and threat of others is one way of practicing heartfulness in a stressful situation. And finally, allow positive experiences to really sink in. Remember our Teflon positive experiences? It is one thing to have a positive experience, it is another to feel we have had a positive experience. To allow positive regard both from others and our own internal encounter can be protective and builds resilience – but be mindful, as long as these feelings don’t over inflate your ego and sense of self-worth you’ll be fine amongst others. If you aren’t sure check in with others – they will tell you.

### **The resilience nutshell**

So, in a nutshell how do we build personal resilience? Focus on the opportunities to learn from setback and difficulties, maintain an internal locus of control, regulate your inner emotional world, watch but do not over identify with your thoughts, feelings and internal commentaries, don’t catastrophise, and be gentle on yourself and others.

Garnezy, N. 1991a. Resilience in children's adaptation to negative life events and stressed environments. *Pediatric Annals*, 20, 459-460, 463-466.

Shean, M. (2015) *Current theories relating to resilience and young people*: A literature review. Vichealth.vic.gov.au

Rotter, J. (1966) ‘Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement’, *Psychological Monographs* 80 (1), 1–28