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Resilience

According to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC), resilience is defined as “our capacity to adjust to changes and challenges in our life, as well as the ability to ‘spring back’ emotionally after dealing with a difficult and stressful time” (VUMC, 2013, p. 1) In a search to narrow down this broad definition, our team performed 25 interviews with professionals across many industries, while simultaneously conducting countless sessions of independent research on the topic. Our universal findings revealed that the definition of resilience is not necessarily as plain and clear-cut as many would presume. In an effort to communicate our findings, we have developed a theory of resilience that takes this general concept a few degrees deeper. Before we can measure one’s individual resilience, we must first seek to understand the most prominent factors that contribute to the growth of resilience in applicable terms. Our theory claims resilience to be measured along a spectrum, with each relevant factor contributing influence on one’s placement along the spectrum.

Resilience Rooted in Family Life

Resilience can be built and shaped from different events within one’s lifetime. While conducting our interviews, we quickly noticed a theme within the events that contributed to one learning to be resilient. Many of the events responsible for shaping one’s current perspective on resilience today were rooted within family life. More specifically, family dynamics, experiences, conflicts, and culture played a significant role in teaching our most resilient interviewees how to recover and grow from difficult times. For example, 44% of our interviewees recalled that their first experience with resilience was caused by a family event or struggle, with 16% of them

being a parent's divorce. Family conflict allows for an individual to understand how to recover, repair, and grow from situations of adversity (Walsh, 2012). While it does have the ability to weaken an individual, it also has the power to strengthen one's resilience and enhance their capability of dealing with and rising above tough situations in the future. Furthermore, family conflict allows the child to adopt childhood resilience, which can greatly benefit one's adult life. Childhood resilience is "the process of, capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999, p. 307). It gives the child the opportunity to understand how to overcome and survive difficult times. From the interviews we conducted, we observed that individuals who endured tough events rooted within their family life were able to come out with a strong perspective and ability of resilience that prepared them for future challenges.

One of the common family conflicts that contributed to resilience was divorce. More specifically, the divorce of one's parents during their childhood. Many of our participants (16%) recalled that their parent's divorce was the first, yet most impactful, event that taught them how to be resilient. Divorce can be equally disruptive for the children as it is for the adults involved. Divorces can cause children to feel emotions of distress, anger, disappointment, and even depression. However, the majority of children (80%) recover and develop skills of resilience from the event that lead to life satisfaction and improvement (T. Jamison, M. Coleman, L. Ganong & R. Feistman, 2014). For example, one participant recalled that when her parents got divorced when she was 16, she had to convince herself that she wasn't the victim. She didn't want individuals to pity her, and she didn't want to pity herself either. She developed the skill of resilience to prove to people, especially her dad and brother, that she was now helping to take care of, that she was strong and able to overcome struggle. As a result of this event, she still tries

her hardest, even during the toughest of challenges, so people don't view her as a victim. Her parents divorce taught her that she has the power to overcome anything that she is willing to put effort towards. Another interviewee recalled that her parent's divorce caused her to have to spend time with parts of her family that she didn't enjoy seeing. Having to make these visits that seemed inconvenient and annoying, however, allowed for her to develop a strong sense of resilience. It taught her at a very young age to understand her family values and know when to push through and do the right thing, even though she didn't enjoy it in the moment. It allowed for her to understand that she could get through unenjoyable times and come out with a stronger value and appreciation for her family. From this time in her life, she knew she was physically and mentally able to undergo difficult times and come out stronger than she was before.

Fifty eight percent of individuals also revealed how their childhood responsibilities and personal struggles within their family were a key contributor to their resilience today. For example, one individual explained that since he was raised in a lower income family, he had to start working at age 12 as a newspaper delivery boy to help provide for his family. Since he was working, sometimes even multiple jobs, at such a young age, he had to miss out on fun activities other kids his age got to participate in. This was a hard time within his life, but it taught him that hard work is needed in order to achieve results. Pushing through hard times allowed him to take care of himself and his family, and made him realize that even the toughest of times are needed within life. Stories like these from several of our participants demonstrated how tough times in childhood are significant contributors to the development of resilience in adult life.

Experiencing emotional distress and conflict as a child can lead to either risk or resilience within adult life (Furman, 2010). For the individuals that were interviewed, they reported that their tough times during childhood and within their family allowed for them to develop strength

and resilience that was needed to overcome more complex problems in the future. Furthermore, because of these events within their family, they were able to understand that they have the ability to survive conflict, and come out even stronger than they were before. Family conflict is important among the spectrum of resilience because it serves as an individual's first experience of recovering and moving on from a tough time. It allows the skill of resilience not only to be introduced but strengthened. It gives a person the ability and understanding that they can get through any tough times that they may endure in the future. Without this, it may be harder for one to grasp the concept of resilience within their adult life.

A Solid Support System

Further, the presence of a support system can also contribute to one's ability to be resilient. Specifically, a support system can be defined as an individual, or "network of people... that we can turn to for emotional and practical support," (Butler). When discussing resilience, or the ability to overcome adverse situations, we are often looking for these various forms of support to come from those around us.

Support systems can exist in a variety of forms, the most common being family. To show, among our twenty-five collective interviewees, twenty of them (80%) named "family", in general, or specific family members, as the people in which they would consider to be their support system. This included immediate family members, such as parents, siblings, and children, in addition to extended family members, such as grandparents and cousins. Even so, support systems can exist beyond our family members. They can include friends, colleagues, mentors, counselors, and heads of religious institutions, among various others. Specifically,

twelve percent of our interviewees mentioned their friends as members of their support systems, and eight percent referenced professional colleagues as people that they look to for guidance.

Regardless of the “title” of the individuals that make up a support system, the sole existence of a support system provides us with a general sense of belonging, or the feeling that we are not alone in the struggles that we face. The relationships that exist among an individual and members of their support system are founded on trust, and, therefore, foster feelings of reliability, consistency, and emotional responsiveness, all factors that have been associated with psychological resilience. The existence of these conditions can further facilitate the development of personal attributes that aid in the “development” of resilience, including “the ability to regulate emotions,...solve problems under stress,... and acquire a realistic and positive sense of agency,” (Southwick).

With that, how exactly do support systems contribute to the development of resilience within an individual? What do support systems provide that an individual cannot readily find within themselves? In asking each of our interviewees to tell us about a difficult time that they faced in which their support system was able to help them stay resilient, we were able to find the significance of having a stable support system within our lives.

Support systems have the ability to give us perspective and see situations in ways that we may not be able to. The presence of adverse or challenging circumstances can impact our ability to be rational and see things as they truly are. In fact, when faced with an obstacle, we may find it difficult to see ourselves coming out the other side, and in these moments are when individuals often feel the most alone. Support systems, with their varying levels of life experience and

general presence, can help us put adverse situations in perspective, and be there for us as we find it within ourselves to overcome the challenge we are facing.

Additionally, and overwhelmingly so, our interviewees were able to maintain resilience through the presence of their support system as a sounding board. Simply put, they found that having someone, or multiple people, there and willing to listen to them made a significant difference in their ability to stay strong and stay motivated when the circumstances presented to them would have justified the opposite. Having someone willing to listen to you, especially when you are not at your best, has the ability to bring a sense of sanity to a stressful situation. Support systems will often validate your words, making it known to you that you are, in no way, wrong or at fault for feeling the way that you do. Rather, through listening intently, support systems can find a way to “use” expressed feelings as a basis for advice to give and, overall, encouragement to keep going. Listening, in its simplicity, has the power to make a person feel valued and to validate their existence within a family, a group of people, or a community, and when people feel as if they will not be alone when life presents them with adversity, they are *more likely* to be resilient when those situations do arise.

Conviction and An Understanding of Your “Why”

In addition to the presence of family and a system of support around us, our group has also discovered that one of the main relevant factors that moves a person far along on the spectrum of resilience is having deep conviction and an unwavering passion around their “why.” Now, what exactly is your “why?” It’s a clear and absolute belief of what you’re trying to accomplish, as well as an understanding of the utmost importance of this outcome in your life. We found that people who had this outstanding conviction around their purpose and their end

goal in mind were naturally so much more capable when it came to adjusting to changes and challenges in life and springing back emotionally after dealing with a trying time-which we know is exactly what the art of being resilient entails. If you want to achieve something, you must know exactly what it is that you want. And not only do you need to know exactly *what* you're chasing, but you need to know *why* you want it so badly.

In our interviews, this theme arose instantly. When asked the question, *why do you think some people are more resilient than others*, we commonly received answers such as, "They have a stronger connection to why they're doing what they're doing," as well as, "They understand their purpose more," and very clearly, "They remind themselves of their 'why.'" And when asked the question, *what advice would you give to someone to help them overcome obstacles in their life based on your experiences*, we picked up on an identical theme. Cassandra Stahl, a Northwestern Mutual financial advisor, responded very simply by saying, "Remember why you started!" Likewise, Michael Civitano from the Emerald Retirement Planning Group advised, "Always keep the end goal in mind, and pursue your goals with the utmost determination...never lose sight of what made you begin your journey in the first place." Pat Nocito, CEO of QS Digital, advised, "Pursue your own goals and no obstacle will be too hard to overcome with the passion that comes with your own dreams." From these insights, we gained great clarity around the true power of knowing your purpose, or your "why," and staying focused on what's important to you through both thick and thin.

Even Forbes has explored this concept of knowing your "why", and has published a number of articles on the topic. One article in particular from Forbes that explained this idea seamlessly is titled *Do You Know Your "Why?"* The article explains, "If you've ever faced a significant crisis in your life you'll have experienced the power of purpose to tap reserves of

energy, determination and courage you likely didn't know you had. Your mission was clear. Your goal was compelling. Your focus was laser-like. Your potential was tapped. The power of purpose is similar to the energy of light focused through a magnifying glass. Diffused light has little use, but when its energy is concentrated—as through a magnifying glass—that same light can set fire to paper. Focus its energy even more, as with a laser beam, and it has the power to cut through steel. Likewise, a clear sense of purpose enables you to focus your efforts on what matters most, compelling you to take risks and push forward regardless of the odds or obstacles.”

Along with Forbes, The New York Times released an article as well on the topic of purpose and resilience. The piece includes data gathered from interviews with large numbers of highly resilient individuals - those who have experienced a great deal of adversity and have come through it successfully. Each and everyone one of them reported that they had a clear mission, meaning, and purpose for themselves. The article quotes, “Feeling committed to a meaningful mission in life gives them courage and strength.” So undoubtedly, we identified conviction and a clear understanding of your “why” as a relevant factor in regard to any individual’s position on the spectrum of resilience.

Basic Safety and Physiological Needs at Stake

Lastly, at the core of human psychology, basic safety and physiological needs are paramount to proceed in both early and long term behavioral growth. Abraham Maslow proposed a theory based on his own observations, stating that for a human to access achievement, accomplishment or good relationships, both safety and physiological needs must be met first. This theory parallels many others within human developmental psychology describing growth in human behavior. While it has been argued that Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is more overlapping than it is a pyramid, there is a reason that basic survival needs are at the base of the

original theory. To be able to grow into a fully developed and enlightened individual, you will need to be faced with many challenges and subsequently overcome them. However, there are limitations to this hypothesis, as humans need certain requirements to live. These needs can be as basic as food, water, and shelter, or translate into more complicated biology, like homeostasis and proper climates. Without these physiological requirements, there is no survival long-term, and achievement and enlightenment must be put on the back burner. There is an abundance of people in our world that take these needs day by day, pursuing innate survival and continuation of their lifeline. These people, while cognizant of the world around them, must ignore every distraction with the one goal of fulfilling physiological needs. This in and of itself can be considered resilient.

When faced with obstacles in life involving basic physiological and safety needs, especially when people are dependent on you, you have no choice but to be resilient. Both humans and animals, when backed into a corner, figuratively and literally, do anything necessary to survive. Throughout our interviewing process, we were able to identify people who had their safety needs at stake, leading to the manifestation of resilience in the face of adversity. One interviewee was faced with a considerable amount of stress upon the financial aspects in his early life. This individual had to work multiple jobs as a kid to be able to get by financially, whilst also attempting to balance schoolwork. While on the spectrum of hardships one can face under physiological conditions, this may seem not as comparable to that of surviving abusive relationships or fighting for food and water, but this was a moment in this person's life that has defined him as a more resilient person. The closer one may be to having everything on the line, the more resilient one may appear on the spectrum.

Considering the conversation regarding resilience born out of safety needs, there has been no greater measure of resilience than the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, every working American has been forced to adapt to a new professional lifestyle, with virtually no other option. Throughout the interviews, we asked our interviewees about *the resilience they've built across their career, and how it was manifested throughout the pandemic in both the professional and personal aspects of their life*. Many of them talked about the frustration that accompanies an inability to meet with clients or co-workers; regardless of the industry, interaction with others now eludes the professional environment like never before. The ability to adapt to sudden changes, such as these, *and turn these changes into opportunity*, is perhaps the highest measure of one's resilience. Christian Macchiaroli of Clarity Lab Solutions spoke to his ability to adapt throughout the pandemic, talking about how his career was actually advanced by the situation. "It's been a good opportunity - being an infectious disease lab, we do so many COVID tests a day, so having an opportunity to bring in more accounts, I went into overdrive... ironically, the pandemic was really positive for my career." Christian further spoke about using a potentially challenging and uncomfortable situation for the better; as shown, one's resilience is best measured by their reaction to these kinds of situations. Motivation can come from people around you, and watching other successful people operate can help push you towards your own success, but hardship is inevitable. What separates those who are truly resilient is their reaction to these challenges, and represents one's ability to turn an uncertain situation into a positive experience that will do more good than harm.

Conclusion

Although we believe that resilience is most-effectively measured on a spectrum, we also

know that not all of these relevant factors hold the same weight as we measure a person's resilience. Of course, the more of these relevant factors an individual has, the further along the spectrum they tend to be. However, all four factors are *not* required for a person to exhibit resilience. For example, having family conflict during one's early life can help one develop a strong level of resilience for future conflicts. Further, having a solid support system can contribute to one's ability to maintain motivation and push through difficult situations. However, one can still develop a basic level of resilience without the significant presence of these factors within their lives. These two factors allow for one to develop a greater sense of resilience, resulting in their "placement" further along the spectrum, and without these experiences, an individual may not have the same capacity of resilience. They may, therefore, struggle in certain situations where maintaining a high level of resilience is important.

In contrast, our theory supports that having certain relevant factors *alone* can push someone far along the spectrum of resilience. For example, we found that those who are firm in their purpose and understand the significance of their "why" were some of the most resilient. Even in the absence of other factors, such as a support system or extrinsic influences, those who had a clear conviction of their driving purpose were able to take risks, maintain resilience, and keep pushing forward. Likewise, when an individual's physiological or safety needs become threatened, our findings suggest that their ability to endure hardship surpasses those that do not have their own basic safety needs at risk. These are just two examples of factors that contribute towards the growth of resilience, and as we have shown, resilience is not binary. Rather, it is best measured along a spectrum, and one's position along the spectrum of resilience reflects their lived experiences, successes, and challenges alike.

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