

## **Resilience - your summary guide to the workshop**

### **What is it?**

The ability to bounce back from a very stressful experience or periods of lower level but continuous stress AND to have grown from that experience. Resilience is not a coping mechanism: it is an adaptive response that enables you to perform, learn, grow and enjoy that process.

To express it another way....it is your ability to respond positively to change, pressure and work/life stressors without becoming ill.

### **What makes one person resilient and another one less so?**

There are several factors that can help build resilience and they include: genetics (that may influence your level of optimism); physical fitness; early life experiences (parenting/social support); lifestyle behaviours (eating/exercise/sleep); a well regulated nervous system, emotional intelligence and emotional regulation.

So there could be a number of reasons why one person is more resilient than another. There is no right or wrong about this. Previous difficult/traumatic life experiences can also undermine resilience even if they happened a long time ago. Examples include witnessing upsetting scenes when a child, car accidents, surgery, physical/emotional abuse and even bad experiences at a dentist.

### **Isn't life full of difficult experiences? Shouldn't we just get on with it?**

'Yes' is the answer to the first question and maybe is the answer to the second. We have a wonderfully designed adaptive response mechanism - the autonomic nervous system (ANS) which enables us to trigger the energy mobilisation we need when dealing with threat/challenges, successfully discharge that energy (polar bear shaking) and then recover (completely) by replenishing the energy we need to cope/adapt again with the next challenge/threat - it self-regulates (polar bear deep breathing to switch on the relaxation response) and in doing so becomes more resilient.

So... we have the capacity to successfully adapt to change (note: this is very different from enjoying variety in our lives which could be a coping mechanism) and difficult experiences. However, this capacity relies upon effective physiological recovery. It is not so much that we have a mind and body...it is more how our physiology and psychology are integrated in a system that supports itself when functional...our problem is that the system can become dysfunctional through chronic or traumatic stress: or a combination of the two.

## **Mmmm....how does this happen?**

Our autonomic nervous system (ANS) does a lot of work automatically for us so that the higher functions of our brain can focus on more complex, demanding and strategic thinking. The fact that it is automatic is important and we'll come back to that. For now it is important to understand the ANS has two branches - sympathetic and parasympathetic. We are always in one of these modes. The sympathetic generates the energy to fight or flight (or in more modern society - argue, compete, worry, play sport, play video games, etc.). It is a catabolic process - eating up reserves in the body. The parasympathetic nervous system helps to repair and build the reserves the body needs to cope with the next sympathetic activity or to recover from illness, become fitter, stronger etc. It is an anabolic process and sometimes called 'rest and digest' Ideally, after sympathetic activity we should swing into parasympathetic mode - a healthy nervous system cycles like this throughout the day - energising and recovering.

## **Why do you say ideally?**

Research undertaken with animals show they recover very quickly from high stress situations by switching from sympathetic to parasympathetic. Their effective recovery is enabled through the rapid release of energy built up by the nervous system and the rapid activation of the parasympathetic system. We tend not to do this because we have a thinking mind that ruminates and replays past stressors and adds to them with new or further anticipatory stressors i.e. we prolong the stress response and can even create it with our thinking mind. In fact, we can condition our nervous system to stay more in sympathetic activity than it should: even though we have no need to feel threatened we can imagine we are.

## **Is this a problem?**

In the short term probably not. A certain amount of pressure and work/life stressors are good for us and, as we said at the beginning, will help us become more resilient. The problem is more that if we are continually activating our sympathetic nervous system then we are likely to develop stress-related symptoms. One reason for this is that key functions of the immune system are suppressed when we are in sympathetic mode - this is because it is energy saving for certain organs/systems to be shut down when the ANS thinks we are about to fight or flight. So a suppressed immune system increases the possibility of infections and illness. The immune system comes back on-line when we switch into parasympathetic mode - it is part of our recovery process.

Sometimes it is our mental strength that can undermine our resilience because we can trigger the sympathetic response (burning more energy) when being conscientious, professional, ambitious, perfectionist, determined, compassionate, patient with others etc.

Sleep is also critical to our wellbeing and resilience. If we are firing the sympathetic system with worry, anxiety, working late at night, video gaming/exciting films late at night; using alcohol to calm us down etc. then sleep will be disrupted and along with that will be disturbances to our hormonal system. Fatigue and emotional vulnerability can set in.

So if:

- our stressors (work, family, health etc.) are combining to be too overwhelming or too prolonged for our nervous system to cycle from sympathetic to parasympathetic; and
- we are compounding the problem with lifestyle choices (that are often unconscious habits and, therefore difficult to stop) that keep us in sympathetic activity

then we are likely to reduce our capacity to cope with stress...we will become less resilient. There may be clusters of symptoms you can experience and it is helpful to become familiar with them.

### **What's more important for now is to:**

- build your familiarity with the workings of the nervous system
- be more aware (conscious) of feeling energised/excited/angry/stressed etc. and needing to recover - this will start to help you recognise when you are in sympathetic and parasympathetic modes i.e. if you are often worked up then you can start doing something positive about this
- not to worry about any of this because it is normal for us to go through times when we may be experiencing more stress and as you learn how to manage this you are on your way to becoming more resilient

Going back to the start of this short article - our nervous system is an adaptive mechanism that enables us to experience stress and learn/grow from it. If you can work skillfully with it then you will give yourself an edge that many many people will never have. **And** you will protect yourself from long-term illnesses caused by stress.

### **So.....Simple and practical signs of being in sympathetic mode**

When we sense a need to increase energy to deal with a threat, danger, a competitive act (such as playing sport) or a challenging event (such as public speaking) our brain triggers the sympathetic nervous system with the help of powerful hormones and we may experience any one or more of the following:

- quicker heart rate (maybe palpitations if the stress is excessive)
- rapid breathing (or difficulty breathing)
- sweating (including palms, head)
- butterflies (nervousness) in stomach
- tight chest
- dry mouth
- nausea
- churning stomach
- very focused narrow vision
- hair standing on end

It is helpful to view these sensations as communications from your body to your mind saying "we are paying attention to the threat/challenge you have alerted us to." As soon as you start treating them as communications you are allowing your rational mind some time to intervene in what can be a very fast and automatic emotional response.

If you do not notice the signs then you cannot begin to work on improving the effectiveness of your response to life's stressors. You could be overreacting, for example, and others may view you as over-emotional or too black and white. Or maybe, if the sensations are strong and uncomfortable you can withdraw and avoid situations: creating an impression of being too soft or unreliable.

The sensations are only communications and not proof in themselves that something is badly wrong. We may have become sensitised, over weeks, months and years by repeated stressors and can see danger, problems, risks where there are none. If you see people around you appearing to be more easily stressed than you - this is most likely what has happened to them as a result of past stressors - they have become too sensitive to stress. This is not their fault. If you are a manager then this is a critical point to be aware of.

### **The level of stress**

Picking up on that last point, there is a clear difference between having a bad day due to a few poor meetings, excessive email count, row with a partner etc. and suffering a very traumatic incident such as a car accident, assault, bereavement etc. So we need to notice when we are experiencing signs of stress on a regular basis from minor incidents (implying our resilience is low and our nervous system capacity may be struggling) and more understandable stress symptoms due to an overwhelming event.

## **How it impacts upon your wellbeing/performance**

In simple terms your immune system will not work as effectively if you are experiencing chronic stress - you become more vulnerable to illness and disease because your protective mechanisms are not able to work when you are regularly in sympathetic mode.

If you are a high performer and/or very conscientious then be careful - you are likely to be pushing yourself close to the edge. Sleep disorders, irritability, quick temper, adrenaline seeking behaviour are all signs that could mean you are not cycling from 'fight and flight' into 'rest and digest' (the parasympathetic system).

Yes this seems like a contradiction but elite performers know that they need to practise recovery as well as practise hard work/training. Be in it for the long term and don't damage your health along the way - you can't be a top performer if you develop chronic illness.

## **How do we manage our response to potential stressors?**

First, have a mindset that accepts stress as part and parcel of life - it is there to be experienced, recovered from and by doing so enables a more resilient and smarter us to develop. There are plenty of studies to back this up but hopefully it has a common sense appeal to you. We are unlikely to get stronger and smarter by staying in our comfort zone. Try to control more when you come out of your comfort zone - training often helps us do this and is a positive support for resilience.

Second, practise noticing and tolerating the sensations of stress: accepting them as communications that need to be processed and not necessarily obeyed. Try to notice whether you have developed habits of reacting or over-reacting to certain sensations/situations. These could be habits of defense, aggression, manipulating, avoiding, challenging, guilt, anxiety etc. The habits may not be effective and may not reflect the reality of what is happening around you.

Next...consider very very seriously how many times you make an unpleasant situation worse with your habits of feeling and thinking. Yes situations can be unpleasant but we often make them worse by adding unpleasantness to the unpleasantness. Please do not underestimate this observation. It is a very well observed trait in many people. Again, if you are a manager this is a very important point to explore - both within yourself and others.

The time and space you create by following the above allows your rational mind to catch up with the faster emotional mind. This in itself offers you more choice and hopefully more effective responses. You can accelerate your capabilities of emotional regulation and stress management by:

- developing mindfulness techniques
- finding physical activity routines you enjoy including yoga and tai chi
- developing diaphragmatic breathing techniques
- developing a mix of the above

4/5 minutes a day every day is far better than one/two longer sessions a week. If you can build towards 20 -30 minutes on most days you will notice very significant changes in your mood, awareness and energy. Your resilience will improve as will your capacity to enjoy life. This is a great prize. Be patient because it takes time to change habits but regular practise will work - the mind has to respond (it is called neuroplasticity) to how you use it. It is your mind so why not use it wisely.

Please note this is a summary of some of the main learning from the workshop you recently attended. Each workshop is slightly different due to the nature of the questions which are asked and the discussions which follow. If there is anything missing from this summary which you need further help on please do not hesitate to email [nicola@7futures.com](mailto:nicola@7futures.com).

It should be read in conjunction with other resources provided following the workshop.