# Stress and resilience – downers and uppers.

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Introduction

Stress, as we know, has a poor press. This could be because the word seems to convey multiple meanings from slight anxiety (such as missing a bus) to high anxiety (such as being bullied continuously). This is why I prefer to use the terms in the continuum pressure and tension – both stimulants as they aid concentration if you can keep control and can relieve both, down to strain and distress which are both exhausting, corrosive and cause under-performance because of interference with concentration and mental control.
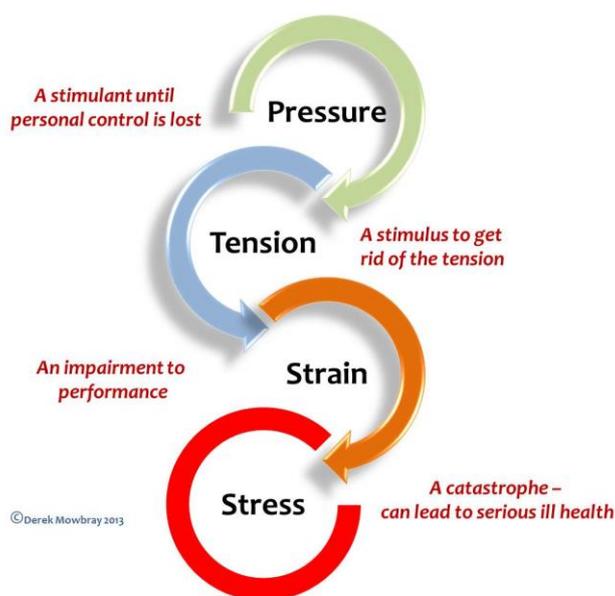
Resilience, as we know, is popular. This could be because resilience is seen as an answer to challenging problems, such as poor leadership, excess demand, constant bombardment of adverse events. It isn't, but people like to think it is because they are reluctant to tackle the underlying causes of the adversities they face – and, in any event, some of the adversities are too great for an individual to tackle.

Despite this, strengthening the foundations of our resilience provides us with a far better prospect of being able to overcome an adversity should other factors, such as context and motivation, be to our benefit. We can learn to strengthen the foundations to our resilience, as well as add to our foundations, the consequences of the experiences we have had.

There are two forms of resilience. There is active resilience – when someone perceives an adversity as a challenge, become energised to overcome it, and tackles the adversity and moves forward leaving the event behind for good.

There is, also, passive resilience – when someone perceives the adversity as a threat and cannot energise themselves to rise up to the threat and overcome it. They cope with the threat using various coping strategies, and hope to 'recover' at some time in the future and 'bounce back' to their sense of normal. This is an appropriate strategy when the adversity is significantly more complicated than a person can easily deal with at the time – such as a serious injury, or domestic crisis. However, there are those who cannot access coping strategies sufficiently strong enough to deal with the adversity and keep it 'in check'. Such situations require support and help for those affected to prevent them from deteriorating into hazardous mental ill health.

The two forms of resilience co-exist. Just as you can move from strain to pressure and back again, in a moment, you can move between active and passive resilience. Sometimes it's a good strategy to be passive for a while until an opportunity arises that enables you to transform an adversity from a threat into a challenge, and energise yourself to overcome the challenge.

Aside from having loose definitions, stress and resilience are connected in other ways.

What is the connection between stress and resilience?

Strain and distress have an adverse effect on individual self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation and mental control.

Those suffering strain and distress can have a negative perception of their own self-worth as a consequence of being engulfed by the adverse event that triggers the distress.

By not being able to tackle the adverse event, the personal perception of self-efficacy can, also, take a knock.

Motivation is adversely affected because all openness to being enticed by something to do something is hijacked by the focus on dealing with the sensations of strain and distress, and having to cope with getting through the day. All thought of doing something other than focus on coping with the event are eliminated.

This, of course, directly impacts on concentration and mental control. The consequence is under-performance. Sufferers of distress will lose their memory and become forgetful of the simple things such as where the car keys reside, and, sometimes, the names of people known well.

Four pillars of resilience

Self-esteem — Self-efficacy — Motivation — Mental control

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Self-esteem (perception of self-worth), self-efficacy (perception of self-belief), motivation (the marriage between you being open to being enticed by something and something enticing you) and mental control (clarity of mind and thought) are the four main pillars for personal resilience. These pillars can, also, be applied to team and organisation[1] resilience when focusing on leaders and managers, and teams collectively.

Strain and distress, therefore, have a direct impact on the resilience of individuals as it erodes the four pillars by undermining the ability to remain in control.
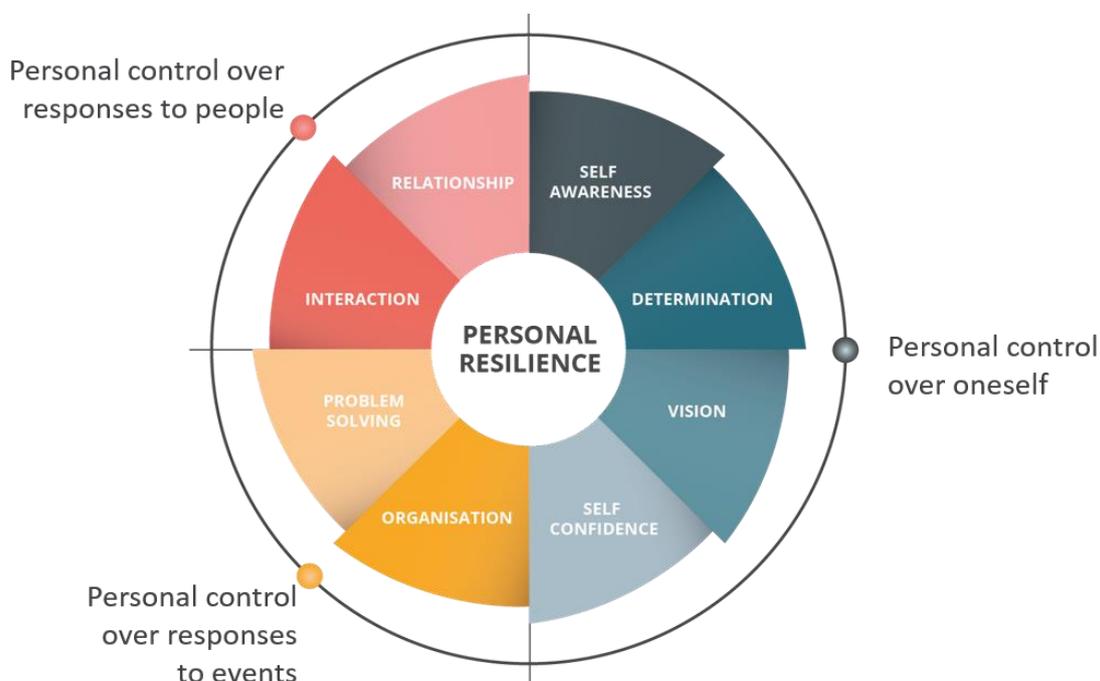
The implication of this is profound for organisations.

If the organisation is incubating strain and distress through poor leadership, management and culture, it makes the organisation not only under-perform but vulnerable to adversities. The organisation and its workforce are not resilient.

The answer to the question is that the impact of stress is on the four pillars of resilience. Therefore, strengthening the four pillars in individuals potentially contributes to reducing the impact of strain and distress on the individual.

What is the implication for training people in strengthening their personal resilience?

The personal resilience development framework contains eight elements, four of which are about strengthening your response to yourself, two are concerned with controlling your response to events and the final two are about controlling your response to others.

The Personal Resilience Development Framework

Personal control over responses to people

RELATIONSHIP
SELF AWARENESS
INTERACTION
DETERMINATION
PERSONAL RESILIENCE
PROBLEM SOLVING
VISION
ORGANISATION
SELF CONFIDENCE

Personal control over oneself

Personal control over responses to events

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[1] There are other approaches to organisation resilience, such as creating redundant capacity to cope with changes in demand for products and services, or coping with disaster.

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These elements are linked to the four pillars of resilience in the following ways:

- Self-awareness plays to self-esteem, self-efficacy and mental control
- Determination plays to self-efficacy and mental control
- Vision plays to motivation and mental control.
- Self-confidence plays to self-esteem, self-efficacy and mental control.
- Organisation plays to self-efficacy and mental control.
- Problem solving plays to self-efficacy, motivation and mental control.
- Interaction plays to self-esteem and mental control.
- Relationships plays to self-esteem and mental control.

It is a fallacy that strengthening personal resilience will get organisations and teams out of the vulnerable situation they may find themselves. Personal resilience can only go so far. Personal resilience does not fix the adverse events that trigger strain and distress.

The reason is that strengthening personal resilience is about how people respond to adversity, not about how people change the adversity itself.

By strengthening the foundations for individual resilience, we expand the knowledge the person has about themselves and whether they may respond by being resilient in a specific situation.

The adversity itself triggers a choice for the individual to overcome it or not.

Resilience is a choice, based on self-interest, mental control, motivation and the capability to find strategies for transforming threats into challenges, rising to the challenges and overcoming them. Key to the decision making is the context in which the adversity arises. If the context is toxic, a person is less likely to value the working environment and to be energised to address the adversity, compared to a working environment that the person treasures because it's supportive, making it more likely the person will energise themselves to overcome the adversity.

Therefore, it is impossible to train people to respond to every unknown adverse event (whilst it is possible to train people about specific adversities in specific contexts). Better to train people in strengthening the foundations for their personal resilience – self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation and mental control, so they are more broadly equipped to tackle a wide range of possible adversities.

What organisations need to do, is provide the triggers to provoke strengthening individual self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation and mental control. This is down to leader behaviour, and the cultural environment that they create and maintain.

The answer to the question is that training in strengthening the self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation and mental control of individuals provides a better prospect of people being resilient, as it broadens the basic knowledge of oneself that helps in the choice to be resilient or not. Whatever the choice, personal resilience does nothing to change the adversity.

Does strong resilience reduce the impact of strain and distress?

Much depends on the nature of the adversity and its context.

If an adverse event occurs in the context of a supportive team that triggers psychological wellbeing, the individual will treasure this working situation and not wish to see it disrupted by an adverse event. The prospects are high, if the person has strong resilience foundations, and sees

the adversity as a challenge, they will rise to it and overcome it without experiencing any form of strain or distress. They are more likely to experience pressure and tension.

The converse is the case if a person works in a non-supportive environment. They might have all the strong foundations, but self-interest in being resilient isn't great because the environment isn't conducive to strong engagement with it or work. They may decide not to rise to the adverse event, and choose to live with it. They will continue to under-perform until the situation changes, something they may be have been doing for some time prior to this adversity. They, therefore, may experience strain and distress.

The answer to the question is 'maybe'!

Conclusion

Strain and distress always have the impact of bringing someone 'down'; making them less able to concentrate, think independently, be motivated and perform.

Because the impact of strain and distress is on the four pillars of resilience in individuals, strengthening individual foundations of resilience has the potential of buoying people 'up' so they tackle adversities without experiencing strain and distress.

However, never believe that strengthening personal resilience is the antidote to organisationally created adversities. It isn't. Resilience is not the answer to challenging problems such as poor leadership, excess demand, constant bombardment of adverse events. Organisations themselves need to tackle the underlying causes of such adversities.

Why not have a taster – try out our free eLearning Programme for Personal Resilience.

MAS Resilience Programmes

The MAS Resilience programmes comes in various shapes and sizes:

- A Masterclass with Dr Derek Mowbray on **Resilience – the whole picture** delivered over multiple on-line sessions for in depth understanding or as a shorter awareness session for senior teams.
- **Personal Resilience** - an on-line, interactive programme delivered over 2 x 3 hr sessions
- **Team Resilience** - an on-line, interactive programme delivered over 2 x 3 hr sessions
- **Strengthening Personal Resilience Train-the-Trainer Programme** – in house, or open programme taking place in November.
- **Indepth eLearning Programme for Personal Resilience**
- **Short eLearning Programme for Personal Resilience**
- **Derek Mowbray's Resilience Guides**

Email barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk for further information about our programmes.

If organisational issues such as poor leadership and adverse events need to be addressed, email Barbara to arrange a time for a chat with Derek Mowbray to discuss the solutions.