

Resilience Brief - VMH 2021



Resilience is the ability of a system to adapt, cope, respond, persist, recover and even grow in the face of stressors, adversity or setbacks.

A 'system' could be a person, a family, a community, a country.

Central to the concept of resilience is the presence of a stressor, adversity or disturbance. These will differ depending on what system you are considering. For an individual, stressors range from loss of job through to life-threatening trauma. For a community, a stressor might be chronic unemployment or natural disaster.

Resilience is then the capacity and process by which that system adapts to that disturbance.

The resilience of a system is always the result of multiple interacting factors and is influenced by context and time. That means it isn't really accurate to say an individual (or system) is or is not broadly resilient.

For example, an individual might be able to bounce back easily from a financial stressor, but not an emotional one. A community might be able to manage a natural disaster well, but not be able to address long-term chronic unemployment in the community.

An individual might get more resilient over time, because of an accumulation of resources. A community might get less resilient over time because of intergenerational patterns of low education.

The good news is, it is possible to move most systems towards a higher level of resilience. We just need to be specific about what we are doing, when, and for what purpose.

Resilience in people

For this brief, we are focusing on resilience in people. You might focus on individuals (e.g. 'what can I do to be more resilient?') or families ('how do we create resilient kids?') or even communities ('what can we all do to help each other be more resilient?').

Resilience in people is the capacity of that person to adapt, cope, respond, persist, recover and even grow/thrive in the face of setbacks, challenges and adversity.

On the whole, humans are quite resilient. For example, over 50% of us will experience a significant trauma in our lifetime, but only ~8% will develop PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

However a focus on resilience is still appropriate because:

- (a) we want to reduce preventable suffering as far as is possible, AND
- (b) because of the number and complexity of the challenges we will face in our lifetime: environmental, economic, social, political and individual.

The goal isn't just to survive those challenges. It is to learn from the experiences. Then thriving and building a better world becomes an option.

How resilient an individual is in response to a specific challenge is the result of many interacting factors: genetic, neurobiological, psychological, social/relational, community, environmental, economic, historical. There is no one single factor that determines whether an individual will be resilient in the face of a specific stressor.

Psychologists (the 'clients' in this brief) are primarily interested in malleable (modifiable) psychological and social/relational factors. These include things like:

- Locus of control
- Personal history
- Personal history of coping
- Sense of mastery over our environment
- Self-efficacy
- Self-esteem
- Cognitive flexibility
- Optimism
- Intellectual functioning
- Self-concept
- Ability to regulate emotions
- Positive emotions/affect
- Spirituality
- Coping strategies (active vs avoidant)
- Hardiness
- Hope
- Resourcefulness
- Meaning and purpose
- Humour
- Prosocial behaviour
- Mindfulness
- Problem-solving ability
- Quality of relationships with family, family stability - sense of belonging
- Social supports outside family (e.g. peers, professionals, colleagues)

Don't worry if some of these terms don't mean much to you. Part of this project includes getting familiar with 1 or more of these.

A psychologist working with an individual, family or community might seek to help them develop capacity in many of these areas at the same time. For example, running a support group for refugees would likely involve:

- The social support of others going through a similar situation
- Problem-solving common challenges faced by refugees
- Helping refugees feel more in control
- Giving refugees a sense of hope for a better future
- And more....

A few things to consider

As you develop your project ideas, there are a few things to consider.

1. When working to enhance someone's resilience, we might do this directly or indirectly.

Directly means we are upfront and explicit with individuals about attempting to enhance their resilience. We might be trying to enhance their general level of resilience (e.g. overall ability to manage stress, coping strategies) or prepare them for specific situations (e.g. preparing for bushfires, stress inoculation training). In direct approaches, resilience is the outcome we are seeking and what we are providing individuals is the knowledge and tools to do this.

Indirectly means we are trying to modify a factor that we know is related to resilience, but we aren't focusing on resilience as the outcome. For example, we might do a campaign on the benefits of optimism, knowing that it will likely positively impact resilience, but that isn't the specific outcome we are seeking (optimism can have many benefits)

2. There are discrete and ongoing stressors

A natural disaster is an example of a discrete stressor, that is, time limited. There is a clear period of time before, during and after the stressor.

For discrete stressors we can intervene at multiple points in time to enhance resilience:

- Pre-stressor - work with the individual during non stressful times to build capacity and resources, plan for difficult times
- During stressor - work with the individual at the point of exposure to the stressor to provide additional supports and resources
- Post stressor - work with the individual in the aftermath of the stressor to rebuild and manage the consequences of the stressor

An ongoing stressor might be something like a chronic health condition. The stressor is always present in some form or another and the person needs to find ways to cope with it.

When intervening with these kinds of stressors, we are assuming the stressor will be in play for a reasonable length of time (perhaps indefinitely) and the job is help the person adapt to living with that stressor and build quality of life *despite* that stressor.

Your job with this brief

To develop a campaign, product, service, object, art-form that has the intention of increasing resilience in people..

In coming up with your campaign, product, service, object or art-form, you will need to clarify:

- 1) Who are you targeting and why?
- 2) What is (are) the stressors/ adversity that impact this group and for which you intend to make them more resilient
- 3) When are you targeting them (pre, during, post stressor, ongoing)
 - a) For pre-emptive interventions, how are you going to convince people who have yet to experience the stressor to prepare for it?
- 4) What are you hoping will change in these individuals that will make them more resilient? (i.e. what resilience factors are you modifying?)
- 5) How will these changes make these individuals more resilient

In the process, it is expected that you will do some independent reading on the topic of resilience, with the specific population/stressors/factors that you hope to address.

The psychologists on this project include: Dr Gareth Furber, Richard Oborn, Sarah Burton, Rachel Reilly, and Simeon Jones. They will be available during design studios, zoom consultations and feedback sessions to help you conceptualise and develop your project.

Some examples to get you started

Regardless of what you end up choosing, an important first step is to locate some examples of existing communication design interventions relating to the specific context you are interested in. Analyse and evaluate how they address the issue.

Who are you targeting and why?	General adult population
What is (are) the stressors/ adversity that impact this group and for which you intend to make them more resilient	Workplace stress
When are you targeting them (pre, during, post stressor, ongoing) For pre-emptive interventions, how are you going to convince people who have yet to experience the stressor to prepare for it?	At any point
What are you hoping will change in these individuals that will make them more resilient? (i.e. what resilience factors are you modifying?)	Improve lifestyle factors (sleep, diet, physical activity)
How will these changes make these individuals more resilient	Improve physical and mental health

Who are you targeting and why?	Refugees
What is (are) the stressors/ adversity that impact this group and for which you intend to make them more resilient	History of trauma, dislocation, adjusting to new culture, racism
When are you targeting them (pre, during, post stressor, ongoing) For pre-emptive interventions, how are you going to convince people who have yet to experience the stressor to prepare for it?	On arrival to Australia
What are you hoping will change in these individuals that will make them more resilient? (i.e. what resilience factors are you modifying?)	Sense of belonging, feeling welcome in Australia
How will these changes make these individuals more resilient	Feel supported and wanted, feel ok about asking for help, know what supports are available to them

Who are you targeting and why?	Chronic illness
What is (are) the stressors/ adversity that impact this group and for which you intend to make them more resilient	Diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain
When are you targeting them (pre, during, post stressor, ongoing) For pre-emptive interventions, how are you going to convince people who have yet to experience the stressor to prepare for it?	Ongoing
What are you hoping will change in these individuals that will make them more resilient? (i.e. what resilience factors are you modifying?)	Sense of control and mastery
How will these changes make these individuals more resilient	They'll feel more confident in their own ability to manage their illness

Who are you targeting and why?	Populations affected by natural disasters
What is (are) the stressors/ adversity that impact this group and for which you intend to make them more resilient	Bushfire, flood
When are you targeting them (pre, during, post stressor, ongoing) For pre-emptive interventions, how are you going to convince people who have yet to experience the stressor to prepare for it?	Pre
What are you hoping will change in these individuals that will make them more resilient? (i.e. what resilience factors are you modifying?)	Making preparations to ensure valuable items and information are safe from damage
How will these changes make these individuals more resilient	Reduced sense of loss, increased sense of control, availability of tangible resources during difficult times

References

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