



# Practical resilience

How can we strengthen our resilience as practitioners? Specialist in the psychology of resilience, **Chris Johnstone** begins a new column offering practical approaches to resource us in our work



I was struck by the cover of the last edition of *Counselling at work* (Winter 2012) - a face looking upwards towards the words "Facing adversity; developing resilience". With adversity on the increase in many workplace environments, this column continues the exploration of how we, and our clients, can help grow resilience.

I start with the pictures above I was introduced to nearly 30 years ago by Professor Patrick Pietroni, a pioneer of holistic medicine. He described health as similar to rowing in a boat, with illness represented by a crash into a rock. Conventional medicine mostly takes a problem-solving approach that focuses on the rocks. A holistic approach widens the view to also include the water level, which represents a person's background level of resilience. When someone's water level is high, they may float over situations that might otherwise be bumpy. When at a low ebb, with their water level low, they are more likely to crash.

When working with clients, I like using this image because it opens up a conversation around the factors that influence resilience. When someone is going through a rocky patch, they can often identify features of their life that drain them and push their water level down. They can also map out factors that help their resilience levels rise. Risk factors like conflicts, bullying and cutbacks make the crash of a stress-related problem more likely. Protective factors like good support from colleagues and pauses for renewal can have a buffering effect.

To draw out more information about protective factors, and also protective processes (ie the things people do that have a protective effect), I ask clients to describe a time when they faced a challenging situation, but got through this



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in a way they now feel good about. Being curious about what helped them do this, I ask whether there were particular strategies they used or inner strengths they drew upon. Two other areas I explore are resources they turned to (such as counselling services, self-help books or supportive relationships) and insights they found helpful.

I refer to these four categories of Strategies, Strengths, Resources and Insights as our 'self-help SSRI'. They represent a resilience toolkit everyone has, but which can also be reviewed, developed and added to. I'm aware those four letters SSRI are more often associated with a type of anti-depressant medication known as the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (Prozac is a well-known example). I use these letters intentionally to emphasise that actions we take and choices we make can also have an anti-depressant effect.

When I teach courses on resilience, I usually end by asking people what they are taking away that might be useful to them. The boat and water level image is one of the most mentioned items. It can be used as a mapping tool, where upward arrows are drawn to represent specific actions and choices that strengthen our resilience.

Another well-received image is that of the pearl in the oyster. I use this to illustrate the insight of post-traumatic growth. When an oyster is irritated by an uncomfortable piece of grit or sand, its response is to secrete a shiny substance that covers the grit, this eventually hardening to form the pearl. When we're facing an adversity, the image of a pearl can become a source of strength as it symbolises a different story about what can happen as a consequence of trauma.

If we know that post-traumatic growth can happen, then we can look for ways to help it happen more. For example, inner strengths like courage, determination and the ability to forgive are called out from us by situations where they are needed. We can consciously help these strengths grow by giving them our attention. When we, or our clients, are facing an adversity, useful questions to explore are: 'what strengths are you needing to draw upon in this situation?' and 'what helps you express that strength?' One of the ways a crisis can become a turning point is when it provokes us to find, and develop, a strength we didn't know we had before.

Perhaps the most important insight of resilience training is that resilience itself is learnable. It isn't just a quality some people have and others don't. I draw inspiration here from adventure stories, where it is common for the main character to appear rather wimpy at the beginning. At the start of their stories, neither Harry Potter nor Frodo seem like pillars of strength. But they learn strategies, develop strengths, seek out resources and become schooled in insights that help them find their way.

Whether from real life, autobiography or fiction, we can learn by watching others and seeing how the story of resilience, in its many different forms, plays out. When we get to know this story well, it can become a source of strength within us. In difficult times we might wonder 'what would a story of resilience look like here? If I were playing my part in it, what might I do?' We can live from this story. And we can pass it on to others.