

A RESILIENCE STRONGER THAN ANY CHALLENGE

VIDEO ONE

Resilience was originally an engineering term. Resilience measures how well an object sprang back into shape after being bent. But resilience has also come to refer to the human capacity to recover from difficulty.

Psychologists emphasise that human resilience is made up of two elements. The first is *recovery* – how well a person rebounds after a time of difficulty. The second is *sustainability* – how well a person can keep going when things are hard.

Medical researchers have found that we have varying levels of resilience. Those who had a healthy bond with a caring adult in early life often have higher levels of resilience. But shorter-term factors affect our resilience too. Anything which makes it difficult to ‘think straight’ – if we’re finding it difficult to sleep, or we’re ill, or we’re over-reliant on alcohol and other drugs – affects our resilience. On the other hand, if a person has recently mastered a new skill – maybe they’ve learned to cook, or developed a talent in a new area of interest – they often are more resilient to face life’s wider challenges.

But the most important factor in determining resilience is whether a person feels motivated to keep going during a period of difficulty.

To put it differently, resilience is related to whether we have a sense of purpose, even when life becomes very hard.

The most famous demonstration of this principle came from Viktor Frankl.

Arrested in his twenties, Frankl spent time in four Nazi concentration camps. The conditions shocked him. Captives lacked food and warmth, sleep and space. Frankl watched life become a struggle for survival.

Many people died before ever getting to the gas chambers.

Yet Frankl also noticed a number of captives whose bodies refused to give up on them. Somehow they were able to brave their surroundings and keep going. Frankl noticed these people had something in common: they had something to live *for*. In the dirt and the cold, facing malnutrition and abuse, they still *wanted* to live.

We may not face such extreme circumstances, but there's a broader principle. To maintain resilience in life's difficulties, we must have a sense of purpose. Even as we suffer, we must see our lives as valuable. Only then can we keep going.

As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put it, the person "who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

The problem is that it's hard to find a strong enough 'why' that can keep us going when life gets hard: when coursework mounts up, or relationships break down. If we will just live and one day die, our courage in the face of suffering is no better than strengthening a sandcastle against the tide.

The lack of resilience that many of us feel should cause us to ask whether our culture's 'why' is really adequate.

So, if we are to be made more resilient, we need to discover a sense of meaning. And not just any old meaning. This meaning not only needs to bring us out of pressurised situations intact – but more deeply formed too.