

Workplace matters

Rolling with the punches Sandi Mann

The ability to bounce back from life's knocks (sometimes referred to as 'bounceability' or 'psychological Teflon') is increasingly being recognised as a life skill vital to success and optimal mental health. Everyone faces setbacks and disappointments but it is how we deal with them that is key.

Psychologists have thus long been interested in the factors that make someone resilient, since if we can teach these skills, we can really impact on their health and wellbeing. Some of these factors include emotional intelligence, an acceptance that setbacks are part of life, having an internal locus of control, good problem-solving skills and a positive outlook. Some of these are traits we are born with (or not) but many psychologists believe that others can be learnt. Much of our understanding of resilience and the recognition of its importance has been developed through studies of individuals and groups in adverse circumstances, such as after disasters like 9/11.¹

Optimism, for example, is considered key to bouncing back and being able to 'roll with the punches'. Research into learned helplessness tells us that, while most people quickly learn to be helpless when they do not feel they have any control over a situation, around a third of people don't.² The difference between those who become helpless and those who don't is that the people who don't give up tend to interpret setbacks as temporary, local, and changeable; 'It's not going to be like this for ever; just because this is bad it doesn't mean my whole life is bad, and I can do something about it.' Training people to think like optimists, then, is one way to teach resilience. There are intervention programmes that have proven to be very effective at doing this, such as the Penn Resiliency Program in the US, which teaches cognitive-behavioural and social problem-solving skills and is based in part on cognitive-behavioural theories of depression by Aaron Beck, Albert Ellis and Martin Seligman.³ Key elements of the Penn

programme include learning ways to challenge unrealistic negative beliefs, strengthening problem solving, adopting assertiveness and negotiation skills, improving ability to deal with strong feelings, and learning how to tackle procrastination through use of decision making and action-planning tools.

The American Psychological Association suggests other skills that people can develop in order to improve their resilience. These include maintaining good relationships with close family members and friends (since social support is a good way of developing resilience), taking decisive actions rather than just hoping problems will go away, seeing setbacks and difficulties as opportunities for self-discovery and growth and nurturing confidence in your ability to solve problems.⁴

Resilience training has long been a feature of military life, especially in the US, but recently UK civil servants have been offered this too within leadership programmes to help them cope with steep job losses and an increasingly tougher climate. By 2015, Whitehall will have lost almost one in four civil servants in the Government's austerity drive, which has depressed morale.⁵ Resilience training is also being used increasingly within the private sector to help with sweeping organisational changes such as job losses. In these difficult economic times, instilling resilience in employees is likely to be seen as even more beneficial than traditional approaches to stress management. The difference, according to an article in *HR Magazine* recently, is that resilience looks at how staff can 'manage change and prevent it becoming stress, while stress is the product of an absence of resilience'.⁶ For example, investments company Canada Life has, since late 2012, replaced all its stress management courses, instead focusing on building team and personal resilience.⁶

So, for those of us working in employee counselling or organisational psychological training, it looks like stress management is out and resilience training is in. Any organisation hoping to survive in today's turbulent times

needs to become an agile and resilient organisation with a tough, positive outlook that will allow it and its staff to cope with the difficult times that are inevitable. It is not so much survival of the fittest these days as survival of the toughest.

References

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