

What has a year of Covid, lockdowns, isolation and unexpected deaths taught us about the human trait of resilience?

Resilience, or ‘the ability to recover quickly from difficulties’, is widely recognized as a person or object’s capacity to return to its original form after stress. Indeed, the word itself stems from the Latin verb *resilire*, ‘to leap back’. However, the trait has another definition: ‘the process of adapting well in the face of adversity and trauma’ (1). On the surface, these interpretations appear synonymous, yet an important distinction must be made; do we classify resilience based on the capacity of a system to recover or to adapt?

At the beginning of the pandemic, I reflected on how the country could have been better prepared to respond; how many deaths could have been prevented by earlier interventions to improve our nation’s health and wellbeing long before Covid hit our shores (2). Not only were we ill-equipped to deal with a pandemic from a strategic perspective, but our public health system had also failed to cultivate a resilient population whose physical and mental health could withstand an attack by a deadly disease. Now, one year on, have we learnt from our mistakes? Has the public’s tenacity bolstered the defences that the government initially failed to provide? Most saliently, will we use our experiences from the last 12 months to guide the restoration of society or will we be content to return to our house on the sand?

Despite the lack of preparation, the past year has borne witness to incredible feats of human ingenuity, demonstrating the trait of resilience at its finest. Amongst these were the honourable responses of healthcare professionals, valiantly persevering in difficult conditions with limited resources on the frontlines, and the work of pioneering scientists, revolutionising vaccine development to deliver protection from the virus in record time. Both adaptations which undoubtedly saved many thousands of lives.

In addition to these heroic acts, the general public has shown considerable resilience in acclimatising to our dystopian reality. Teachers and students have shifted to new methods of learning; entrepreneurs have pivoted their entire business concepts to embrace new modes of operation in a locked-down society; even everyday office workers have successfully navigated the complexities of a sudden fusion of home and work life. All have soldiered on to continue ‘as normal’ in a world that is anything but, once again demonstrating our species’ propensity for adaptation in the face of adversity.

Conversely, we have witnessed the issues which arise from adopting a ‘back to baseline’ mentality, favouring recovery over revolution. It is this which brings into question whether this response is truly the definition of resilience? Whilst the virus has been evolving, developing its approach to boost its likelihood of survival and proliferation, our government’s strategy to tackle the pandemic has remained virtually stagnant. Cycling through lockdown after lockdown, dampening spirits and damaging the economy, all whilst doing just enough to bring the infection rate down to ‘acceptable’ levels.

As the saying goes, ‘Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results’. A proportion of tragic Covid victims was inevitable – sometimes even

modern medicine is unprepared for mother nature's assaults. But how many times can past mistakes be repeated; indecisive action; ill-considered decisions; unreliable data; before we stop classifying deaths as 'unprecedented' and admit that in reality, they reflect a failure of the system itself? Unfortunately, the selection pressure for effective action from leaders across the world is strong, and few have adapted to thrive in this new environment. Another way to think about it is to imagine the pandemic as a game. We're currently playing checkers, scrambling to respond to problems at the moment they begin to wreak havoc throughout the nation. Instead, our leaders must begin to approach it as a game of chess, refining their tactics to ensure that we, as a society, are always thinking a few steps ahead. In this way perhaps resilience refers to learning how to outsmart the competition rather than outlast it.

Finally, we must ask ourselves what restoration means to us and whether it is even something we should be aiming for? Surely we have learnt much about ourselves, our values and our priorities over the past year which we would do well to remember as we turn the corner to enter a post-pandemic world? Factors which have been proven to promote resilience, such as social connection, feelings of inclusion, time spent in nature, exercise, good diet and sleep, were all markedly absent in many lives before the virus hit (3). The state of the world was by no means perfect and the space which long periods of isolation, combined with the stark reminder of the ephemerality of life, has provided caused many to rethink their priorities. If we cannot incorporate these insights into our rehabilitation, are we not just condemning ourselves to return to an unfavourable status-quo?

It's not unusual to hear politicians talking about how we 'bounce back' from this situation. Whilst returning to baseline would be a marked improvement on the current circumstance, I believe this sentiment to be a mistake. We should focus not on returning to 'normality', but instead set our sights on moving forward, putting all that we have learnt about ourselves and our society in the last twelve months to use. Rather than recovery, we should direct our attention towards renewal and regeneration as the ultimate goals.

I would argue that true psychological resilience should be measured not by one's ability to recover from insult, but to emerge from the event in a stronger position than they began. Just as we can choose between two similar, but fundamentally different, definitions of the term 'resilience', so too can we choose the path we take over the coming months and years. Ultimately, it is up to each one of us to judge whether we aim for a resilient recovery, or a rebirth.

References

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