

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

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, not more than a handful of people believed it would last longer than a few months; yet current evidence estimates that this disease will take years to be completely eradicated, if ever. However, regardless of this outlook, it appears that most humans have not given up on their lives, hopes and dreams – by virtue of being resilient. With resilience being key to survival, this essay explores the concept, experiences and studies of this intriguing trait.

Prior to examining what the past year has taught us about resilience, we must specify its definition. In the Oxford Dictionary, resilience is defined as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties”.¹ It does not only refer to individuals, but also systems – whether that be a family, community or entire global population. At first glance, one might assume that this is a trait of only the most optimistic and positive of us, but research shows that in fact it is an innate attribute of the human race.²

Superficially, one might assume that resilience is simply the will to persevere in the face of difficulty. However, there are many forms of resilience that the pandemic has exposed. The introduction of lockdowns and other restrictions has proved our patience and drive to continue living our lives while waiting for a return to normalcy; isolation from our family and loved ones has questioned our motivation to upkeep social relationships and be content with our own presence; unexpected losses have tested our will to go on without saying goodbye to, and coming to peace with the loss of, key people in our lives.

Being acquainted with a few medical front-line workers, it is difficult to hear about the inexplicable frustration, exhaustion and despair they face as a result of the thousands of patients who, despite their best efforts, die before their eyes, all while working long shifts for weeks and months on end. Without discrediting their suffering, as a highly socially dependent person for maintaining mental wellbeing, it has also been difficult on a personal level to bear the endured social isolation of the past year. Fluctuations in mood and motivation are inevitable, but still distressing, in particular due to their exacerbation by the pandemic. Yet, both the frontline workers I know and myself have thus far been able to continue on with our lives, undoubtedly aided by resilience.

Nevertheless, while incomparable to anything most people have encountered in their lifetimes, the ability of a pandemic to push our resilience to its boundaries is not new. For example, the Spanish flu of 1918 certainly resulted in a multitude of unexpected deaths and prolonged periods of isolation. Situations such as war or natural disasters also test human tenacity, albeit in different ways – but what makes this pandemic different?

Arguably, we are in a significantly better position than previously. Due to improved healthcare systems and global health protocols, more deaths and cases of severe illness can be prevented, whilst social contact without physical face-to-face interaction is easier than ever, aided by social media and video calling technologies. The internet also provides more entertainment than ever before, be it watching Netflix, playing multiplayer games, or browsing virtual art galleries.

On the other hand, the conditions are slightly different. It is difficult to imagine many other situations which combine the uncertainty, frustration, loneliness and grief felt during the pandemic during events such as war or natural disasters. While these may impact certain aspects of our lives to a greater extent, such as through extensive deaths, displacement, or poverty, they do not necessarily combine the entire spectrum of difficulties imposed by the

pandemic. Moreover, there is an aspect of novelty, as for the large set of individuals fortunate enough to be living in peaceful and wealthy countries of the Western world, the aforementioned life-changing events and their effects are viewed as something distant, solely seen on the news. Currently, a vast majority of, if not the entire population, has been affected by the events of the past year, whereas natural disasters or other similar events occur solely on a local scale.

However, it is this universality that allows for extensive studies of the human trait of resilience like never before. Through observational, or even experimental studies, the pandemic has created a sample size for studying resilience like never before. There has been some research to date – for example, neurobiological studies have shown that the same response is activated during stress and resilience, as acute stress responses promote adaptation and survival. Psychological studies have suggested that both environmental and genetic differences may explain how humans deal with stress, and that neuroticism and extraversion are reliable predictors of resilience.³ Still, a vast amount remains to be elucidated.

Additionally, resilience during the pandemic has not only interested scientists – the lay population is interested too. The *Felix* student newspaper of Imperial has produced a video documentary about the effects of lockdown, whilst global corporations have produced countless reports on human resilience. Notably, in the week of March 22-28, 2020, the first week of lockdown in the UK, the Google search queries for ‘resilience’ rose to an all-time high, with a relative score of 100/100. Indisputably, resilience plays an important role in our lives, and, as with other introspective studies, learning more about the human mind is the foundation to minimising mental suffering.

Ultimately, it is apparent that resilience is more than just adaptation, but rather a complex combination of mental processes that enables humans to withstand a variety of hardships. Resilience is nothing new; but in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic has been brought to the forefront of our lives, enabling us to establish coping strategies and endure the complications of lockdowns, isolation and unexpected deaths. While typically brought on under negative circumstances, this unique opportunity to take advantage of the widespread ubiquity of resilience should be seized without hesitation, to deepen our understanding and benefit future generations in prevailing in the face of adversity.

Word count = 993

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