

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

Ask a physicist for the definition of resilience, and they would tell you that it is the ability of a material to return to its original shape after being stretched or bent. Ask a classicist, and they might explain that its roots lie in the Latin verb 'resilire', meaning 'to recoil' or 'to jump back'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines resilience as 'the ability of people or things to recover quickly after something unpleasant'. But the past year has revealed that these definitions are, at their core, wrong. Because there is no way that in 2, 20, or even 100 years we will have returned to life pre-covid.

Going 'back to normal' would mean recreating a world in which we are blind to our vulnerability. Many people would say that the whole world collapsed because of the existence of a single type of virus particle, SARS-CoV-2. But this isn't really the case. The reason that we couldn't cope was that we weren't prepared, technologically, physically, or mentally. A year ago, we didn't have the resources for the massive-scale vaccination programme currently in place. We couldn't imagine paying almost 10 million people out of the government's pocket to sit at home and not go to work for months. And the concept of basic cleanliness was sometimes nonexistent: every day, many of us would take the bus or tube and then have dinner at a restaurant 10 minutes later without even thinking of using hand sanitiser. Being resilient really has nothing to do with finding our way back to how we were before — it is about reacting and adapting to what happened, and learning and growing because of it.

So what would happen if we rejected resilience as synonymous with return to normality?

First, we would realise that our resilience is found in the inner strength we have gained over the last year. On a national level, we have seen the NHS come together in an unprecedented way for the vaccination effort, resulting in the incredible 15 million dose milestone that we surpassed by Monday 15th February. In our communities, we've become more united and caring than ever; in April 2020, over one in three adults (37.5%)¹ had gone shopping or done other tasks for neighbours, and 1 in 4 were friendlier with their community². In early March 2020, the government volunteer scheme reached double its target number of 250,000 within just a couple of days³.

Although we might still be coping with a loss or dealing with a lack of support during lockdown and isolation, we have all grown personally as well. We've been able to see past our individual and immediate needs and give up so much of our freedom because we have accepted that the best way of getting through the pandemic is to stay home. This time last year, we would never have been able to imagine a world where it is illegal to have friends over, frowned upon to stand only a meter from

¹ Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain (ONS, April 2020)

² Coronavirus: The psychology of why lockdown is making our relationships stronger (SkyNews, April 2020)

³ More than 500,000 people sign up to be NHS volunteers (The Guardian, March 2020)

the next person in the queue at Tesco, and impossible to attend real-life school. But now these facts are just a part of everyday life, and we have accepted them as such. We are resilient because we have been able to adapt to these changes and see through to the end of the tunnel when they are over. And they *are* almost over.

'I've won the lottery!' Exclaimed a trembling woman as she shuffled through the doors of the atrium, smiling from ear to ear. In her hands, she clutched a vaccination form as though it truly were a cheque worth a million pounds. Guiding her to the vacant vaccination pod, I couldn't help but soak up her infectious enthusiastic energy, even as my exhausting 8-hour shift as an usher at the clinic was coming to an end. All day, I'd been walking back and forth over the 6 metre gap between the entrance and the vaccinators' desks with almost 800 different people. It was the most physically exhausting yet mentally energising thing I had done in months.

The people working alongside me came from a diverse range of backgrounds. A retired TFL worker, stay-at-home parents, marines, students: the only thing they had in common was their desire to help out. Even the doctors were stepping out of their comfort zones; local GPs taking on the role of event coordinator, IT fixer, emergency responder, and volunteer trainer all rolled into one. Despite the challenges faced, the clinic's atmosphere was undeniably a cheerful one, and I'm sure there was a smile beneath each of our masks. For what felt like the first time, the pandemic had manifested a positive side effect. Covid-19 has shown us that resilience is an intrinsic trait to humans beings — no matter our background, we all have a hidden reservoir of strength to dip into when times are difficult because we are hardwired to survive and grow.

The past year has not been the amazing start to the new decade that we expected, but it has had a unique silver lining. We now appreciate how incredibly capable each of us are, both as individuals and as a country. We've been able to withstand the toughest of trials and become stronger in the process. We have a newfound appreciation of everything we previously took for granted: our autonomy, our friends, and our wellbeing. This has all come about as a result of our innate resilience, our ability not just to 'jump back' and recover, but to surpass our previous limitations.

'Every difficulty in life presents us with an opportunity to turn inward and to invoke our own submerged inner resources. The trials we endure can and should introduce us to our strengths.'
— Epictetus