

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

When we ask ourselves what a year of COVID and all its challenges has taught us about the human behaviour trait of resilience, we must consider what *resilience* is. Resilience has commonly been defined as “positive adaptation despite adversity”^[1]. Adversity and negative life events, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its multiple lockdowns, include: physical suffering - due to virus-related infection and sickness; emotional suffering - due to unexpected deaths, fear of death, isolation and the mental uneasiness of uncertainty; financial hardship - due to employment loss or reduction in income and domestic hardships - such as abuse. Each individual's and community's capacity for resilience is different. By analysing experiences of the pandemic, we can attempt to see what anecdotal evidence has taught us about this significant commodity of resilience.

Physical activity

On the top of Druk Amitabha mountain^[2] overlooking Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, there exists a nunnery housing Buddhist nuns - commonly nicknamed the “Kung Fu Nuns”^[3]. These nuns, in pre-COVID times, fought fiercely against human trafficking and sexual predation^[4]. During the COVID pandemic, the nuns have exhibited extraordinary resilience. Analysing aspects of their lifestyle and mindset can provide the key to unlocking emotional resilience.

The “Kung Fu Nuns” train intensively in the martial art of Kung Fu; they believe that “Kung Fu helps to train [their] minds and...hearts” and empowers them physically and emotionally to help more people, to take on bigger challenges, and to be more fearless in their expression of compassion. A study done by Southwick and Charney^[5] states that “resilient individuals...have a regular habit of exercise”. Neurobiological research does suggest that - due to increased blood flow to the brain - physical activity causes biochemical changes to occur in the brain; such changes, including the formation of new connections between neurons, promote neuroplasticity, and, hence, potentially increase resilience^[6] - explaining why the nuns prosper so greatly from their training.

Socially supportive environments versus isolation

Isolation has been one particularly challenging impact of COVID-19. Many times during COVID-19, loneliness has been cited by many as compromising a person's ability to persevere and remain resilient^[7]. The “Kung Fu Nuns” clearly comprehend the benefits of belonging to and serving a community, and derive strength from it. Following the onset of the pandemic, the nuns began delivering supplies, including face masks and food, to over 2000 families in Nepal^[3], while also educating locals about the virus, and feeding animals which might otherwise die. As well as practical aid, the “Kung Fu Nuns” emotionally support residents affected by COVID; the 25% increase in Nepal's suicide rate since pre-COVID times^[8], demonstrates that their help is very much needed. The nuns know that they cannot “change the whole world”, but, for them, even just “help[ing] one life [is] a big success” that makes them “feel encouraged” to resiliently persist in their efforts^[3].

Positive emotions: generosity and gratitude

For many centuries Buddhists, including the nuns, have felt and believed that “love, kindness and compassion”^[4], significant teachings of Buddhism, are at the core of their fearless nature. Neurobiologist, Richard Davidson, has been able to provide scientific proof of their theory; he performed an experiment where eight “long term Buddhist practitioners” alternated between a neutral and meditative state - “a state in which love and compassion permeate” the mind. Davidson observed high-amplitude gamma-oscillations - indicative of enhanced neuroplasticity; therefore, he concluded that the brains of Buddhist practitioners are more capable of change than is usual, such as, hypothetically, becoming more resilient^[9]. A 2009 laboratory study of university students by Cohn et al.^[10] supports these findings; it was observed that students who regularly experienced positive emotions, like happiness, became more content with their lives and allowed them to function more easily in a range of difficult situations.

Spirituality, the ability to contextualise and a source of hope

Finally, it is evident that spirituality provides the nuns with a source of hope and allows them to contextualise their issues more effectively- resulting in increased resilience. The “Kung Fu Nuns” declare that they are eager to persevere in their efforts because “nothing is permanent and that [the COVID-19] situation will pass”^[4]; impermanence is a fundamental Buddhist philosophy that promotes hope and patience. The nuns use their spirituality to provide them with perspective and help them remain resilient. In addition, the traditional Buddhist practice of meditation increases their self-awareness and reminds them that they belong to a bigger community - hence, teaching them to contextualise their issues more easily. Spirituality can, therefore, help individuals to demonstrate resilience - in that they respond more positively to stressors.

In conclusion, and in answer to the question on what the pandemic has taught us so far about human resilience, it can be deduced that resilience is a “dynamic, multidimensional process that operates across many biopsychosocial systems”^[11]. The resilient and fearless “Kung Fu Nuns” provide insight into the factors fostering resilience: being physically active, belonging to and serving a community, feeling frequent positive emotions, and possessing some source of hopefulness and context. Additionally, in answer to the question of whether people’s emotional resilience has generally strengthened or weakened during the pandemic, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that reactions to COVID vary greatly among the population. Resilience appears to be an innate quality that needs only to be properly awakened^[11]: for some, this hardship has led to increased levels of resilience; for others, resilience reserves have been depleted. In the correct environment, these reserves of resilience can be replenished and restored to their full capacity^[12].

Resilience is not a lack of fear, but the ability to adapt positively and overcome it. As the nuns say: “we are scared. ... But fear can’t stop us”^[3].

Word Count: 947

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