

Resilience is Good - But Thriving is Better: How Staying on Your Feet Beats Bouncing-Back



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Abstract

It is often said that the number of times we get knocked down by the challenges of life is of no real significance - what does matter however is how quick we are to recover from the challenges and set-backs of life. The ability to recover quickly from such events is referred to as resilience. Resilience is an important cognitive skill to have - it helps build belief in one's ability to deal effectively with difficulties of life. It could be argued however, that having this particular skill is of little value if we don't learn about why it is we keep getting knocked down in the first place. This paper argues for the value of learning to stay on one's feet as opposed to constantly bouncing back - it discusses the importance of self-control and 'stick ability' as opposed to mere 'bounce-back ability'. Learning from the experience of being knocked down can help us, in other words to stay on our feet during times of difficulty - a skill, it could be argued that is just as important, if not more important than resilience.

Introduction

We have all heard statements along the lines of; 'It doesn't matter how many times you fall ... what does matter is how many times you stand up, shake it off and keep moving forward.' This is an admirable attitude indeed - it reminds us that life can be challenging at times and that each-and-every one of us will face setbacks from time to time and, moreover that it isn't the number of times we get knocked down that matters but the number of times we get back up again. The above quote is a comment on the importance of resilience - a life skill described as the ability to bounce back from adversity. Examples of the kind of adverse events a resilient person may find themselves bouncing back from would be; the breakdown of a relationship, financial hardship, redundancy, serious illness, losing one's home, being physically assaulted, death of a loved one, and so on. Some people will recover slowly from such events, some people may not recover at all - resilient people will recover quickly [1,2].

The ability to recover quickly is good, but so is the ability to learn from our experiences - failing to learn valuable lessons following a set-back could result in us continuing to get knocked down when staying on our feet, under such circumstances, might be a better option for us! So, perhaps it does matter how many times we get knocked down if being constantly knocked

down means we're not learning from our experiences. That said, resilience is an excellent life skill to have, there is no question about it. I like the idea of resilience and I have written favourably on the topic on numerous occasions. I am struck, however by the emphasis that is placed on resilience simply being the ability to 'bounce back' from adversity. And I'm wondering whether there are other psychological skills we could develop to help us succeed in the face of adversity in addition to resilience and its bounce-back ability. There is something to be said, I'm sure, for our ability, not only to bounce-back from adversity but in 'staying on our feet' during challenging times, a skill I'm sure we could all learn to do as we reflect on what resulted in us being knocked down in the first place.

When I think about resilience and the 'bounce-back ability' associated with it I find myself thinking of a bobo doll, that weighted, pear-shaped doll that rolls back up into an upright position after being knocked over. The bobo doll is a bit like a boxer who despite being knocked down time and time again keeps getting up. A boxer, such as this, possesses a number of admirable qualities such as courage, determination, and of course resilience but the problem is he keeps getting knocked down! He may of course get up and win but then again, he may not. Now let's imagine, for a moment the opponent he is fighting.

This particular boxer stays on his feet throughout the fight. He avoids being hit while simultaneously hitting his opponent which eventually leads him to winning the fight. This boxer also shows a number of admirable qualities - characteristics which keep him on his feet until he succeeds in his desire to win. He is a champion boxer who weights up the odds and triumphs over them. Who would you rather be - a boxer who keeps getting up no matter how many times he is knocked down or the one who stays on his feet?

A winning boxer may avoid being hit but he isn't avoiding being in a fight. What interests me about this metaphor is the way a champion boxer can engage fully in what is clearly a challenging and demanding event - a boxing match while at the same time dealing with the event in a positive, empowering way. In refusing to give in to the pressure of the event he too is showing resilience but he is also showing a number of additional qualities - so the question is, what additional qualities along with resilience could help us deal with the challenges of life?

Psychologist Angela Duckworth [1] is fascinated by what determines success in life - why some people, when confronted by a difficult or challenging situation will succeed while others give up. Her research suggests that it isn't simply how bright or intelligent a person is, it's not talent or ability alone that determines whether a person will succeed in life or not - its GRIT! So, what is grit? Grit is a personality trait possessed by individuals who show tremendous motivation and determination to achieve the goals they set themselves in life and they continue to show these traits despite the obstacles, barriers or distractions they may face. There are two defining characteristics gritty people have;

- A. a passion about the learning journey they are on, and;
- B. The ability to persevere until the goal they set themselves is achieved.

Gritty individuals also show tremendous self-control - they are able, in other words, to manage their thinking and emotions well. It's self-control that enables these individuals to avoid distractions and the temptation to give up when the going gets tough. Gritty people, in other words, have excellent 'stick-ability' - they understand that the journey we take through life won't be an easy one and that in order to achieve our potential we need to show tremendous determination and the ability to stick to the task in hand until the job is done. Life, in this sense, is more like a marathon, then the 100 metres.

Grit's about persisting in the face of adversity as opposed to simply bouncing-back from it - it's about being consistent particularly during periods of great change and uncertainty. Grit grows out of the beliefs an individual has about their ability to achieve particular goals even when the odds are against them. Gritty individuals believe in themselves and in their ability to achieve - they don't blame others when things go wrong, they take responsibility for their actions and they learn from their

experiences particularly when things go wrong. Those with grit learn, in other words, from their mistakes - failure is never an excuse to give up; on the contrary, it's an opportunity to learn, improve and get better.

Another psychological quality worth having, in addition to resilience and grit is the ability to thrive. Thriving can be defined as the ability to experience life in an optimistic, confident, empowering way. Thriving people are positive, confident and psychologically robust - they accept that life can be tough at times but this isn't to say that the difficulties of life should be avoided. On the contrary, thriving people face up to the challenges of life knowing they have the skills and resources needed to deal with whatever life throws at them. Thriving people certainly have the resilience and grit needed to achieve and succeed in life but they also have so much more. Thriving people believe they are fundamentally responsible for the course their lives takes. Those who thrive, in other words, feel in control of their thoughts and feelings - life, in other words, is understood to be something that isn't 'happening to them' but something they create through the way they choose to think and feel. Thriving is about managing our thinking and emotions well and it is this ability thrivers have to manage their thinking well that enables them to take control of their lives.

The good news is we can all learn to thrive. People aren't born knowing how to thrive, it's a skill we can all learn. Learning to thrive gives us the skills and resources we need to manage our thinking well in potentially difficult times - this in turn reinforces the empowering belief that, not only can we deal with adversity but that adversity doesn't have keep knocking us down. On the contrary, believing we are indeed in control of our thoughts creates the belief that, not only can we stand up to, and confront adversity but we can ultimately triumph over it. We wouldn't get knocked down during times of difficulty if we genuinely believed in our ability to stand up to and deal with the difficulties life throws at us which is what thriving is all about. And every time we stay on our feet during times of difficult, even if we do wobble at bit reinforces within us the empowering belief that we can, indeed control of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The ability to bounce-back is good, having passion and perseverance is great but thriving is better.

Postscript: a word about relapse

Psychologists Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, [3] offer what they call the six-stage programme of change. The process starts with the precontemplation stage - the person, at this stage of the change process may be aware they have a problem but they have no intention, at this point of changing their behaviour. However, the person at some point in the future will move to the second stage of the process - the contemplation stage. During this stage the person in question continues to be aware they have a problem but they still have no intention of changing, however, at least they are aware and, more importantly they are beginning to think about changing! The third stage of the change

process is the preparation stage. The person is no longer simply thinking about changing - they have actually decided to change their behaviour, they seek out a professional helper and make a commitment to work with this practitioner. The person feels focused and motivated - they begin to believe in their ability to change, and having made this commitment, the person now enters the fourth stage, the action stage, so called because the person has actively changed their behaviour. A commitment to maintaining this new behaviour is, moreover in place. The person in question is now in the fifth stage - the maintenance stage. The person is committed to keeping the newly achieved change. The process has been a success but the process is not as yet, complete - there is one more stage to consider. The last and final stage is relapse.

Prochaska et al. [3] except that falling back into the old patterns of behaviours, the behaviours the person wanted to change in the first place is inevitable. Relapses, however, needn't be a problem providing the person in question learns from the relapse. A relapse doesn't mean failure, for example - just

because a person has had a bit of a blip doesn't mean they are incapable of changing their behaviour for good - they've had a blip, that's all. We just need to review what went wrong, what lead to the blip in the first place and, more importantly what needs to be done to reduce the possibility of a relapse happening again in the future. In time the blips we will diminish and finally stop as the process of change becomes complete. Experiencing a blip or relapse is an example, in this sense of being knocked down following adversity but as Prochaska et al. [3] have shown being knocked down needn't be a certainty in times of difficult - we can, in other words learn to stay on our feet.

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