

Be nylon – the wisdom of resilience



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Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties, toughness and change. It's about bouncing back and getting up one more time than we fall over. A material like nylon is a good example: it's not easily crushed or creased and stuff washes off it easily – it doesn't stain.

Life can be tough and unfair. I'm a realist, so the starting point is acceptance: it is what it is. Let's understand the objective truth and work out how we're going to get through it.

In times of crisis one human reaction is denial; there's a temptation to put our head in the sand and pretend it's not happening. Helpful questions to ask at this point might be: "What is it I don't want to hear about this situation? What's the worst-case scenario?" My experience is that 99 times out of 100 it's not as bad as it could be, so count your blessings.

Psychological research shows we can choose the way we think. A key part of resilience is avoiding unhelpful thinking. No blame – keep the thoughts constructive and positive. Our thinking should be helpful and generous to ourselves and others. In short, look beyond the pain and reach for realistic optimism.



Asking for help is a sign of strength not weakness

Examples of what I call stinking thinking are thoughts that are down on self, others, our future and the world in general. They are rigid 'it must be my way' thoughts, full of assumption, not reality-tested and goal blocking – all the reasons not to.

Healthy mental habits or helpful thinking are accepting of ourselves, others, the world and our future. A generosity of spirit, if you like. Flexible or agile thinking which is reality-tested and not assumptive. Thinking which is "can do" and "let's find a way to make it work".

Never underestimate the power of belief. To be resilient we must choose to believe in ourselves. Sometimes people need help to grow self-belief. Kind words of encouragement are perhaps more important than we know.

Asking for help is a sign of strength not weakness. We should be prepared to ask for other views and then be prepared to be helped and help others. When I was in a remote part of Mozambique I met a missionary from the US in the north. The rains fell and the water rose. We talked about the floods.

He smiled and told me the story of a righteous and Godly man who saw the water rise around his home. He prayed to God for help and as the floods rose higher and higher he climbed onto the roof of his house where he saw trees and cars float by. He prayed to God to send angels to save him because he was a righteous believer.

The rain fell and the waters continued to rise when a boy paddled past him in a canoe. He stopped and said: "Can I offer you a ride in my boat, Sir?"

The righteous man replied: "No thank you! I've prayed to God to save me and I believe he'll send angels down shortly." The boy nods and paddles away.

The righteous man continues to pray in the rain and soon a fire service boat with flashing blue lights slows its engine and they urge him to jump aboard. "No thank you! I've prayed to God to save me and I believe he'll send angels down shortly." They know him to be righteous and trust him so, reluctantly, they sail on.

The wind and rain rise. His prayers and pleas grow more intense. Finally, through the driving rain a Coast Guard helicopter hovers lower. The winchman descends clutching a sling and tries to save him. Pushing it away, he says: "No thank you! I've prayed to God to save me and I believe he'll send angels shortly." The winchman's ear piece crackles: "We have to respect his views and there's another 20 waiting. Leave him. Let's go."

Swirling flood waters rise, the torrential rain continues, the house creaks and groans and finally collapses sinking into the black swirling void. The man quickly drowns. He dies, goes to heaven, meets his creator and says: "God I prayed to you to send angels. Why didn't you answer me? I am a righteous man."

God smiles, puts his hand gently on his arm and says: "What do you mean? I sent a canoe, a rescue boat and helicopter! There are angels among us and we should all strive to be someone's angel."

It is a great privilege for me to share my experiences and practical principles for resilience with you at this conference. Be nylon! I wish you all a crush- and wrinkle-proof future!