

2 You and your resilience

As a coach, you cannot work with clients at a level beyond which you would be willing to go. Asking a client to explore an issue at a level deeper than you would go, or to bring into the open a vulnerability that you would shy away from, is unethical. It moves you out of the space of partnering into positioning yourself as the doctor who can diagnose the condition, but does not want to experience it. Beyond issues of ethics, your ability to work with whatever your invitation opens up will be limited by your lack of consideration of yourself. Their disclosures may trigger issues within you that are unresolved. You will then be unavailable for your client, as your attention redirects itself to your inner dialogue and emotions.

Having addressed an issue, you will be more available and better equipped to work with it when a client brings it to you. It will open up your receptivity and creativity. Having worked through your issue, you will be able to access your insights in the service of your client's growth. It will support you in the dance of coaching because you will not just be following steps offered in a book, you will be able to improvise.

It was for this reason that when I began research on resilience, it was important that I looked at my own resilience, and that I understood how I had dealt with life difficulties. By doing so, I came to recognize what was different between the times when I remained resilient and those when I did not. I was able to identify what I could trust would still be accessible in tough times, and what is less available. I came to understand the model I had created, and what had shaped that model. I did this through talking with a psychotherapist who enabled me to understand the texture of my own resilience. This work has informed how I work with clients, and makes me more sensitive to the nuances of experience they bring to coaching.

I believe that just as I learnt a great deal through looking at my own resilience, the same will be true for you. That is why this chapter focuses on you. It is an invitation to take time out to consider your own experience,

and to then draw out its value for working with others. It may prompt you to want to dig deeper by talking with a coach or psychotherapist. Even if it does not, working through this chapter will enhance your reading of the rest of the book.

Resilience Questionnaire

The Resilience Questionnaire is designed to help you assess the resilience qualities you possess as you live your daily life, so that you can recognize what enables you to be flexible in response to the demands of living and working. As you answer the questions, think of how you generally see yourself operating in the world. There are no right or wrong answers.

Resilience Questionnaire						
		Strongly disagree				Strongly agree
	I have the ability to:	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Deal with the demands of my life					
2.	Be flexible in order to adapt to whatever I am presented with					
3.	Know what is important in my life					
4.	Change direction when the preferred route is not working					
5.	Ask for help when I need it					
6.	Find what I can take control of when things are uncertain					
7.	Control my emotions when feeling pressured					
8.	Face reality, even when it is difficult					
9.	Manage my way through difficulty					
10.	Focus on actions that move me towards longer term goals					
11.	Let go of what is not working					
12.	Recognize when others need support					
13.	Be decisive					
14.	Use strategies for managing my stress					
15.	Find solutions to the challenges I face					

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16.	Recognize when I need to develop new behaviours and skills						
17.	Hold onto a sense of perspective even when things are difficult						
18.	Be proactive in addressing challenges						
19.	Remain optimistic even when things are tough						
20.	Acknowledge the difficulties of change and accept what has to be let go of						
21.	Be creative in finding ways of doing things even when resources are limited						
22.	Talk openly about frustrations with trusted colleagues, friends or family members						
23.	Deal with problems head-on, rather than hoping they will go away						
24.	Recognize when current pressures are affecting my responses						

Scoring the questionnaire

Transfer the scores you gave to each item on the Resilience Questionnaire to the appropriate box below. Note the vertical listings of the statement numbers.

							Total
Self-belief	1	9	15				
Elasticity	2	16	20				
Meaning	3	10	17				
Solution finding	4	11	21				
Support	5	12	22				
Proactivity	6	13	18				
Emotional control	7	14	24				
Realistic positivity	8	19	23				

What does it tell you?

By looking at your profile, you will probably see that some qualities are more developed than others. Alternatively, you may see that you have a balanced profile in that all are present to a similar degree. If you find yourself with little differentiation, then ask yourself the question, ‘which of these do I rely on most to get me through challenges?’ Give those qualities an extra weighting.

How does your profile reflect how you present yourself to the world? Does it capture how you would describe yourself or how others signal that they see you?

The aim at this stage is to understand your starting place. The questionnaire is designed around eight contributors to resilience and its loss. These are based on recurring themes in resilience research.

Self-belief

The trust you have in your own actions and your capacity to deal with whatever comes your way.

Elasticity

The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and not stay attached to what is familiar and comforting.

Meaning

Having a sense of purpose and the creation of meaning helps people get through difficult times. It helps you know what you are working towards and why. Purpose helps us persist when things are difficult. Your meaning may come from attachment to a particular goal, or it may come from important values or beliefs that inform your life, such as religious faith or humanistic principles.

Solution finding

Being able to work with what is there and be creative in creating solutions, even when resources are limited or options narrow.

Support

What helps people through challenging times is the availability of emotional support, so that you know you are not facing things alone and are being listened to. It is equally important to be able to offer support to others, as it validates your worth.

Proactivity

Change and uncertainty can cause a freezing up, as individuals wait for ambiguity to disappear. Proactivity means taking action to improve the situation, rather than hoping things will get better or someone else will improve things for us.

Emotional control

When under pressure emotions become heightened and more volatile, with negative emotions often dominating how we assess the world and ourselves. Being able to manage our emotions helps us retain a sense of perspective, and to view problems at their correct size, rather than becoming overwhelmed by them.

Realistic positivity

Blind optimism has little value in getting us through difficulties because when expectations are not met, there is a collapse of belief and confidence. Realistic positivity comes from facing the reality of the situation, and assessing our strengths against that context. Being able to say, 'how can I make the best of what is happening right now?', rather than hoping things will just get better.

When your resilience is tested

The purpose of the questionnaire is to help you assess the benchmark position of your resilience in daily living. However, there is a difference between resilience viewed as a set of fixed qualities and resiliency. Resiliency is you in action. Eleanor Roosevelt allegedly said, 'People are like teabags, they don't know how strong they are until they are put in hot water.' Dipped in hot water, some people unearth qualities they did not know they had, while others find they are not as resourceful as they imagined.

In order for you to understand your resilience in action, it is useful to reflect on how you have reacted when facing a significant life difficulty.

When the going got tough

Think about a time when you faced a challenge, such as the loss of a job, the ending of a significant relationship, the death of someone close to you, infertility, illness or a severe downturn in your business. The experience should be one that falls into the category of normal life challenges, as distinct from the abnormal traumatic events that characterize post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Identify one situation where you coped well, perhaps better than you would have imagined. Identify a second situation where you did not cope so well. You may even have been surprised by how you responded. The event may not have been major and yet it had a profound effect on you. Take some time to write about the experiences under the headings given below.

Example 1: Where I remained resilient

- The situation
- The context in which it occurred
- The resilience qualities I was able to access (use the Resilience Questionnaire as a reference point)
- Other qualities or skills that helped me get through that are not represented in the questionnaire
- What made it possible for me to access those qualities?
- How they were of value to me
- What they enabled me to do

Example 2: Where I lost access to my resilience

- The situation.
- The context in which it occurred
- The resilience qualities I was not able to access (see Resilience Questionnaire)
- Other qualities/skills I lost access to
- What prevented me being able to access those qualities?
- The consequences for how I dealt with the event

Reflective comparison

Based on what you have written about your two experiences, consider the different 'you' that you brought to each of them.

How would you see yourself in the first example?

- What image of yourself comes to mind?
- What words capture how you were at that time?
- What identity were you carrying with you?

When one client talked about a time when he was resilient, the image that came to his mind was of a tree standing in a field while a storm blew around it. The tree creaked at times, but stood firm. The words he used were *resolute, shaken at the edges but firm at the core*, and he was certain

that eventually the storm would blow over. The identity that he carried with him was that of a survivor.

How would you see yourself in the second example?

- What image of yourself comes to mind?
- What words capture how you were at that time?
- What identity were you not able to access and what took its place?

The same client when he recalled a time when his resilience left him held an image of himself curled up in a corner with his hands over his head. The words he used to describe himself were *childlike, afraid, wanting to be rescued*. The identity he held was that of a victim.

When you compare your contrasting resilience experiences, what does that highlight for you? What does it add to your understanding of your own resilience?

Resilience in coaching

The previous section asked you to look at the big challenges you have faced, but the truth is that every coaching relationship tests our resilience. For example, you spend time planning for a session and the client takes the session in a completely different direction. A coaching relationship that had been going well suddenly derails, and the client signals a loss of confidence in your abilities. Your client is not taking the actions that they committed to and signals resistance to being pushed to explore the reality of what is stopping them. You get a less than positive evaluation at the end of the coaching relationship, which you thought had gone well. At such times, we have to draw on our resilience.

Accessing our resilience in the moment when coaching means being able to say, 'I don't feel this conversation is going well, what would be more helpful right now?' When you do so, you call on your self-belief. Being willing to let go of an expected direction in the conversation and follow the client shows that you have elasticity. Not relying on your toolkit of resources and inventing something in the moment calls on your solution building. Taking the risk of asking for client feedback on what you could do differently to help them requires an openness to asking for support. Taking the risk of challenging a client on their behaviour requires you to hold a sense of purpose. Noticing and then quietening your sense of panic when you feel the session slipping away requires that you can manage your emotions. Accepting what the client can do, rather than being disappointed because they do not do more, shows that you work with realistic positivity.

Reflect on your coaching

Think about coaching relationships that have not gone as well as you would have liked and consider them from the perspective of your resilience. What part did you play in the process? Did you lose purpose and focus, so that you and the sessions became directionless? Did the resistance of the client cause you to lose confidence in your own abilities? Did you find the client so challenging that your brain froze, or you were focused on your own emotions? Did you cling to an approach even if it was not successful because you could not think what else to do?

We have all had coaching relationships that tested our resilience. I once worked with a client who was a figure of fear for his staff – in fact, that was the reason for being asked to coach him. I noticed that before each session I became anxious that I would not be able to hold my standing with him. He was highly critical, and demanded I constantly explain what I was doing and why. I knew that if I did not hold the resilient me, I would fail him and myself. It was only when I accessed my sense of self-belief – the knowledge that I am a skilled coach, and reminded myself of that fact in the ladies before each meeting – that I was able to become an equal partner with him. When I walked through the door with that knowledge, I was able to use his criticism of me as a useful tool to feed back to him the impact he had on others when he challenged them.

Now consider a coaching relationship that went well but was challenging. You may have liked the client, or it may have been the sort of issue you enjoy working with, but the work was not easy. On reflection, which aspects of your resilience were you able to access? For example, you discovered that you were willing to let go of structure, because you had a sense of trust that you would deal with whatever emerged. Or, you stuck with the uncomfortable parts of the relationship because you had a clear sense of purpose in what you were bringing to the interactions. Or, you were able to offer strong challenge, because even if the client pushed back, you were confident in your ability to deal with their emotions.

One of my clients was seen as brilliant but tricky. She was a creative workaholic who could outthink her colleagues, and appeared to need little sleep. She would send emails in the middle of the night, and would be the only person in a senior management meeting to have read every document, no matter how hefty. She made those around her feel permanently on the back foot. She talked constantly with hardly a space for breath. She was also extremely engaging. It was easy as a coach to be swept along in the enjoyment of listening to her, without adding anything to her thinking. Being resilient in working with her meant not being caught up in the need to look clever, but rather being clear that it was my role to be firm in stopping her talking, and to enable her to start noticing herself and the impact

of her style. It meant holding onto a sense of purpose, as she was explaining away with brilliant rationale her behaviours.

Taking your learning back into resilience coaching

From looking at your own resilience when tested, you will have insights that you can take into your work. It will have helped you to identify what you need to be alert to in yourself, so that you remain resilient in the moment within a coaching session. It will have helped you better understand your resilience qualities and the model you have created about what stays with you and what becomes more difficult to access when under stress. You can use your understanding of yourself to help your client better understand their own resilience, its strengths and its gaps.

Summary

This chapter has invited you to examine your own experience by:

- Assessing your resilience as it operates on a daily basis using a resilience questionnaire based on a mix of trait and protective factors identified from research.
- Offering you a questionnaire to use with your clients to help them understand their own resilience profile.
- Deepening understanding of your resilience in action by writing about two contrasting experiences and noticing differences in your response.
- Looking at your resilience within coaching sessions.
- Encouraging you to reflect on the meaning of your own experience for how you work with your clients.
- Providing you with exercises to use with clients to help them recognize that resilience is not a have or have not quality, and to support understanding of their own response patterns.