



## Get through the tough stuff

Why do some of us recover easily from life's knockbacks, while others falter? *Charlotte Blair* finds out and asks, can we learn to be more resilient?

ILLUSTRATION *Anna Godeassi*

When I was a student at university, my then boyfriend ran a jazz club on London's Fulham Road, where one of the waitresses made a huge impact on me. Not only was she arrestingly beautiful, but – at just 15 – she was living in a squat on the King's Road. To my teenage mind, she seemed impossibly daring and cool.

Later, when I discovered the real reason for her precociously bohemian lifestyle, her set-up looked rather less enticing. Her parents had been in a car crash – her mother killed instantly, while her father remained in a coma – rendering her homeless and practically an orphan. Estranged from her remaining family and with the family business in

receivership, she'd set up camp in an empty Chelsea flat and got on with the business of life. The ultimate survivor, she was always bright and cheerful, flitting from table to table with a sunny smile, picking up boyfriends and benefactors along the way.

To this day, I've wondered how it is that some people can suffer real knocks and never falter, while others crumple at the first hurdle. My friend, for example, could have reacted very differently. She could have sunk into a depression, ended up on the streets or worse. We've all seen it – the divorcee who never loves again or the man who loses his job, but can't face telling his wife. Yet, when the exact same thing happens to someone else, they somehow relish the challenge, embrace the change and make it meaningful.

Resilience – the capacity to cope with stress and catastrophe – is a hot topic in psychology right now. (And rightly so, since we could all do with a little help to get through these turbulent times.) It's a subject explored in a new book, by business psychologist Jane Clarke and Dr John Nicholson, *Resilience: Bounce Back From Whatever Life* ◀

↳ *Throws At You* (Crimson Publishing). Clarke and her colleagues set out to discover not only which personality characteristics help people triumph, but also which life events might prepare them for future hardships. Most importantly, they looked at what the rest of us can learn from these Teflon-coated individuals.

‘Through our work in coaching in the City we were dealing with people facing big challenges,’ says Clarke. ‘We started to notice that some people remained confident no matter what. They found stress energising rather than debilitating and actually seemed to relish the change.’ Clarke and her colleagues conducted in-depth interviews with 26 super-resilient individuals (the R Team). These were people, like my friend, for whom it didn’t matter what life threw at them, they’d just pick themselves up and start over. They also sent questionnaires to a further 300 people, coining a new term – ‘Resilience Quotient’ – as a measure of your resilience level, just as EQ and IQ measure your emotional and intelligence levels.

Their research isolated five key factors that set the most resilient individuals apart: optimism, freedom from stress and anxiety, taking personal responsibility, openness and adaptability, and, finally, a positive and active approach to problem solving.

The first surprise was that women scored consistently lower on resilience than men (in fact, two-thirds of the R Team were men). ‘We were surprised,’ says Clarke, ‘because we know that women cope better with pain and that they recover from relationship break-ups faster.’ When Clarke and her colleagues looked at the results more closely, however, they found that nearly all the difference between the sexes could be accounted for in terms of levels of optimism, with women being much less likely to agree with statements, such as ‘I’m good at seeing the silver lining’, or ‘I generally find that things turn out in an advantageous way for me’.

‘Optimism is imperative to resilience,’ says Clarke. ‘Because if you don’t believe things can improve, it’s very hard to carry on. You only have a finite amount of energy, and if you spend that worrying about all the things you can’t do, or can’t

## ‘The tornado helped me step outside my life’

Juliette Levy

I’ll never forget the day our home in Kensal Rise, London, was hit by a tornado. It was 8 December 2006 and I was working from home when I noticed an ominous yellow light in the sky. Suddenly, the whole garden looked like it was in a washing machine, with trees flying around like paper. It was like a bomb going off. When I opened the front door there was a roof on the cars in front of my house. It was bizarre, like a film. But all I could think was, ‘Are my girls OK?’. Luckily, their room wasn’t hit, but when the fire brigade arrived, they evacuated immediately. The bedroom wall had already collapsed. Who knew what would be next? I immediately went into action mode, setting

up camp at a neighbour’s and contacting the insurers.

I’d always felt that my house was my security. It was where I felt safe. After the tornado, I realised that home was where my people were, not just bricks and mortar. I think the experience made me braver. I felt, if I can cope with this, I can cope with anything.

At the time I was working in television as a senior producer and director, but soon after the tornado hit, while we were still living in temporary accommodation, my unit was closed down and I lost my job. Instead of collapsing, I used the time to explore what I really wanted and realised that although I loved my work, it wasn’t fulfilling me at a deeper level and so I decided to

retrain as a life coach.

Being hit by the tornado gave me the impetus to focus on where my heart and talents lay. Now I use the skills I developed in television to support people who are dealing with challenges themselves, helping them to see them as opportunities, rather than something to fear.

Juliette Levy runs *Smart Tools For Life* courses with partner Claire Shutes ([thegoodcoachingcompany.com](http://thegoodcoachingcompany.com))



## ‘You can never have complete control’ Fiona Hanan

When I turned 40 my husband threw a party and I remember thinking, ‘It doesn’t get better than this.’ We were living in an affluent part of London, I had a good job, lots of friends and I had just discovered I was pregnant. Two months later, I suffered a miscarriage. Soon after that, they discovered a large tumour in the early stages of malignancy on my pancreas.

I’d always been a typical perfectionist, very competitive with strong self-discipline. If I just worked

hard enough I could have the perfect life, I thought, but the illness made me re-evaluate that. You can never have complete control. You’ve got to think, ‘Right, this is the set of cards I’ve got now, how can I make the most of it?’ When I became ill, I just got on with it. Yoga and keeping fit helped, but I also realised the importance of family and friends. Things changed for the better when I had a successful operation to remove the tumour, and I got pregnant again.

I think it helps to start from

a premise that life isn’t always fair and there’s no ‘right’ way of doing things. It’s about what’s going to work. You have to compartmentalise your fear and live as if everything is going to be all right. Before I got ill, I’d always had this search for a ‘perfect’ life. Now, I’ve learned to be happy and find fulfilment in the here and now, rather than waiting for something in the future that might never happen. That’s what resilience is about, having a more elastic approach.

control, then you aren’t going to bounce back or see opportunities.’

But that’s not the whole story. Clarke and Nicholson believe much of the difference in the resilience ratings between the sexes comes down to the difference in how men and women estimate their abilities, as opposed to their actual abilities to cope. Put simply, men overestimate what they can do, while women put themselves down. ‘It’s a very consistent finding,’ says Nicholson, ‘and one that exists from the earliest age. Little boys exaggerate what they are capable of, while little girls do the opposite. So if you ask a three-year-old boy if he can pick up a big object he will say “yes”, whereas girls are more likely to say “no”, when, in fact, girls are actually just as strong at that age.’

It’s a finding that runs throughout education and carries on into adult life. Girls, for example, consistently underestimate their degree results, whereas boys think they’ll do better than they do. ‘Men always say they are brilliant, but it’s just bullshit, really,’ says Nicholson. ‘We call it the Great Pretender Syndrome. But to a certain

extent it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Who do you give the job to? The man who says he can do it, or the woman who says she can’t?’

You might think there is no such thing as being too resilient. Not so, says Clarke. ‘The most resilient people in our survey were the kinds of people no one really likes very much, such as politicians, for example. People prefer a bit more vulnerability, particularly in women, which might account for some of the differences between the sexes.’

Surprisingly, many of Clarke’s most resilient subjects had had terrible childhoods. They had often coped with absent mothers – through bereavement, mental illness or alcoholism. Not that early tragedy will necessarily make you tougher. ‘The same experience can make you more or less resilient,’ says Clarke. ‘These individuals were often the eldest child who had taken on the job of looking after the younger siblings. Essentially, they learned that they could cope. The difference lies in taking control.’ In fact, an internal ‘locus of control’ was a quality shared by all members of the R Team, believing they could influence events, ➤

## How high is your RQ?

Take this test\* by Jane Clarke and Dr John Nicholson. Circle the most appropriate answer

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
In a difficult situation my thoughts immediately turn to what can be done to put things right.	1	2	3	4	5
I influence where I can, rather than worrying about what I can't influence.	1	2	3	4	5
I don't take criticism personally.	1	2	3	4	5
I generally manage to keep things in perspective.	1	2	3	4	5
I am calm in a crisis.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm good at finding solutions to new problems.	1	2	3	4	5
I wouldn't describe myself as an anxious person.	1	2	3	4	5
I don't tend to avoid conflict.	1	2	3	4	5
I try to control events, rather than being a victim of my circumstances.	1	2	3	4	5
I trust my intuition.	1	2	3	4	5
I manage my stress levels well.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident and secure in my position.	1	2	3	4	5

TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_

### RESULTS

#### 0-37 A developing level of resilience.

You might consider yourself a realist, but others think of you as a pessimist. You often feel at the mercy of events and would benefit from a more optimistic outlook. You are tougher than you think.

#### 38-43 An established level of resilience.

You may occasionally have tough days when you can't make things go your way, though you rarely feel ready to give up. Try to develop a sense of perspective and look on the bright side. Don't underestimate your abilities.

#### 44-48 A strong level of resilience.

You might wobble occasionally, but you rarely fall down. You're pretty good at rolling with the punches and turning setbacks into opportunities. You seem to have a healthy sense of perspective.

#### 49+ An exceptional level of resilience.

There's not much you can't bounce back from, though you may need to check that others appreciate your robust approach. Don't let your Teflon coating get in the way of empathy. Not everyone is as tough as you.

➔ while those with what psychologists call 'an external locus of control' tended to feel helpless when things go wrong.

Coping well in one area of your life doesn't mean you'll be equally resilient in all areas. 'Big things, such as illness or bereavement, can be easier to cope with because they generally aren't things we've chosen, so we just get on with it,' explains Clarke. 'But smaller knocks – if someone criticises our new haircut, for example – can leave us completely traumatised. Probably because we believe we've had a hand in our downfall.'

The good news is, regardless of childhood experiences, we can all learn to be more resilient. 'You can train yourself,' says Clarke. 'Women especially need to stop beating themselves up and recognise how well they do actually cope. You can

condition yourself to look on the bright side, be positive and influence things where you can.'

When things look bleak, Clarke suggests 'reframing' the situation. Clarke recalls one client, who was being bullied by her boss. 'She would walk into her office thinking, "This is a nightmare", and the more she allowed him to do it, the worse it got. So instead, she conditioned herself to think, "This is interesting, let me explore what he wants and why". Instead of being backed into a corner, she was asking questions and being assertive. And instead of thinking, "I have no choice", she started to realise she could say no to him. A lot of it is about not being a victim, and instead realising we can influence events.' It's like Mark Twain said, 'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you are probably right.' ■