

Stress and Resilience: A Psychologist's Perspective

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In this short article, I would like to offer you some observations and reflections on how we understand stress and what contributes to our individual resilience. This is drawn from my experiences working as a Clinical Psychologist supporting people who are struggling with their mental health and my roles in supporting the teams who care for others. It also stems from my personal practice, ongoing learning and work as a Yoga Teacher. My two worlds of psychology and yoga are drawn together continually in my holistic approaches to supporting the body and the mind simultaneously. I hope that there is something helpful or interesting for you in this article.

What do we actually mean by 'stress'? It is a term that has become commonplace in a lot of our settings and environments: there is strong social representation that we are feeling increasingly stressed out or overwhelmed, and that stress is a part of our culture and daily lives. The World Health Organisation defines stress as 'a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation' (WHO, 2023). The WHO definition acknowledges that stress responses are entirely natural and normal, and that it is the way in which we respond to stress that determines our overall health and wellbeing.

In my clinical work as a Psychologist, I have observed the broad range of factors and events that might generate a sense of stress. Of course, we all differ in what we perceive as stressful and there is huge individual variation: two people might be exposed to the same challenging situation but the impact of the event on our feelings of stress, anxiety, and overwhelm can be very different. This is where our cognition and thinking process plays a major role: cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) highlights the central element of our explanations of events, thoughts and interpretations in determining our emotional experience (Westbrook, Kennerley & Kirk, 2007). Even with individual variations, I have noticed some patterns in that there are particular circumstances that tend to prove stressful for a lot of people. We can categorise possible stressors as either external (something outside of us that we encounter in the world around us) or internal (something we notice within ourselves). External stressors might include significant life changes such as moving house, starting a new job, going to university, retirement, bereavement, or physical health issues, as well as difficult relationships and problems getting along with other people. Internal events and experiences that might bring about stress include: changes to the way we feel within ourselves; heightened levels of arousal and bodily sensations; changes to our thinking (especially increased worry thoughts and rumination thought patterns); and drugs and alcohol (both of which change the way we feel inside and change how we interpret and perceive things). It is also crucial to recognise that beyond the stress

caused by major life events, changes, and transitions, daily and ongoing stresses in our lives can have a cumulative effect and be harmful to us (Maté, 2019).

Psychological theory indicates that it is not just the stressors that we experience in our lives that contributes to our coping responses and emotional wellbeing. There are also 'vulnerabilities' that we carry with us from our early lives and it is the interaction between these ongoing characteristics and vulnerabilities with life stressors that influences our sense of feeling stressed. The stress-vulnerability model (Harris, 2010), whilst traditionally applied to mental health concerns, is also a useful generalised reflection tool. It helps us to recognise that the experiences we lived through as children and young adults form the foundations of our beliefs and ideas about ourselves, other people, and the world. These early events establish patterns in how we manage emotion and learn to relate to others. If our early experiences were distressing, unpleasant, or traumatic then threat-based patterns in the body and mind and less helpful emotional response styles might be formed. Later, when we encounter stressful circumstances in our adult lives, this can trigger our underlying vulnerabilities and it might make us more likely to perceive something as stressful and tip us from coping okay with life to feeling stressed out, overwhelmed, and unable to cope. Additionally, Maté (2019) emphasises that the current emotional and psychological state of the person exposed to stresses plays a part in our stress responses and behaviours.

My final reflection point on stress will be to consider the role of our nervous system functioning. When we are overwhelmed by stress, our nervous system is less able to tolerate or manage potential threats in the environment (Health & Social Care, 2021). This involves one of two responses in the nervous system: either a disconnected and shut down response in the body and mind (the freeze response), or a protection mode that is focused on escape or defence (the fight or flight response). These biochemical stress responses are normal, experienced involuntarily without our conscious awareness and are designed for survival. At the same time, the body and mind stress response states mean that it is tricky to connect with others, feel safety, explore, rest, and feel calm. However, if we invite an open-mindedness to our internal landscape and develop self-awareness, then we can become more familiar with what state the nervous system is in. Once we have this better understanding of ourselves and awareness of when our stress responses have been triggered, we can then choose to respond differently to restore balance to the body and mind: this is the learning and practice that develops psychological resilience.

Now that we have a psychologically-informed understanding of stress: what it means, when it develops, and how it shows up in the body and mind, we can turn our focus to resilience. Resilience relates strongly to stress in that it concerns the helpful response(s) to challenging and difficult events

in our lives. The American Psychological Association note that resilience is both a 'process and outcome' that involves 'mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands' (APA, no date). What struck me with this definition is the importance of understanding resilience as both a skill (the ways in which we respond to stress) and the consequences of the skills we try (did the skill we applied reduce our emotional distress and help us cope more effectively?). Linked with this, compassion-focused psychotherapies reflect on the notion of doing what is helpful and not harmful and considering our underlying motivations and intentions (Gilbert, 2009). In this way, we might view personal resilience as both the method and result of living with more compassion, care and empathy for ourselves and others, ensuring that we get our basic needs met whilst maintaining kindness, support, and respect to self and other. Resilience can be supported by inviting a compassionate mind-set, thereby turning towards our distress from an empathic, nurturing, and strength-based set of intentions. Similarly to stress experiences in that we all differ in what we perceive as stressful, we all differ in what contributes to our resilience. What works well for me might not be the best solution for you, and that's okay. Becoming more resilient involves active engagement in a process of trying different techniques and exploring what is useful: applying a trial-and-error approach and willingness to step outside of our most familiar patterns.

We can group the coping responses that contribute to resilience into different domains such as: cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and bodily approaches. Cognitive strategies are those which involve our minds and thinking processes. This can include mindfulness-based practices whereby we learn to re-direct our attention away from less helpful thoughts and focus our awareness on things that are neutral or supportive. Mindfulness can include formal practices such as breath-work techniques and guided meditations, but it can also extend to how we approach everyday activities. Kabat-Zinn (1994) defined mindfulness awareness as paying attention 'on purpose... in the present moment... and non-judgementally' (Crane, 2009, p. 4). Cognition-based skills to boost our psychological resilience can include positive self-talk. When employing positive self-talk or affirmations, we learn to deliberately bring more balanced, helpful, or encouraging statements about ourselves and our capabilities into our awareness. For example, if the mind starts to produce negatively skewed ideas such as 'I can't cope' or 'I'm failing at this', then we can re-frame these cognitions to consider supportive and self-compassionate ideas such as 'I can get through this... this feeling will pass' or 'I have shown myself courage for trying' or 'I have learned something from this experience'. Emotion-focused skills that help us become more resilient might include practices to reduce our levels of anxiety and agitation such as relaxation techniques, soothing with our senses, or helpful ways to express emotion through physical exercise, dance, singing, or therapeutic writing and journaling. Behavioural strategies blend across those discussed already in that we are choosing to

respond differently to the difficult situation and the worry-based thoughts and tension that have been created.

To conclude, I wanted to reflect on the ways that we can bring the body into our stress management responses and how this supports resilience. We know that there is a close connection between the body and the mind and that they are inseparable (Maté, 2019). Body-based and somatic approaches support both physiological de-arousal and nervous system regulation, and reduction of the psychological and mind experience of stress. Yoga practices, including trauma-informed yoga techniques, involve a process of turning inwards and using the body, mind, and breath to calm and soothe, balance, or energise and invigorate the body and mind (Spence, 2021). When we recognise that the nervous system and our cognitive and emotional responses have moved into an anxiety-based threat protection stress response, then we might explore the helpfulness of calming and soothing yoga practices. Alternatively, if the body and mind stress response involves disconnection and shutting down, then it might be activating and energising yoga approaches that are most useful. The breath is central to many yoga practices and it supports the shifting out of a stress response by moving us into our soothing system (the parasympathetic nervous system function). Spence (2021) discusses the power of breath regulation practices to enhance relaxation, support better sleep, regulate blood pressure and improve our focus by stimulating the vagus nerve. Learning which breathing practices are most effective for us can support personal resilience by providing a method of calming or energising when stress levels are heightened. Yoga involves working with the body and exploring rhythmic movement or passive stretches. Moving the body, changing our physical position, and stretching can help us let go of nervous system energy that has built up internally. For example, yoga postures that involve active engagement of our muscles or passive yoga stretches involving forward folds might help to release physiological agitation and reduce hyper-arousal.

In this article, I have offered some observations and ideas around understanding stress from a psychological perspective and how we can use these insights to foster personal resilience. We will all face challenges in life and there will be times that are painful. Whilst these things form part of our human experience, we can choose a pathway of self-enquiry to notice the patterns and themes in our body and mind, including how we respond to and manifest stress. From this self-understanding, we can explore holistic methods of growing our resilience and ability to manage stress in a way that is helpful, and not harmful, to us.

About the Author:

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