

How the Christian Life Nurtures Resilience

By Dave Hughes

I was in South Africa on a medical mission trip with my wife the first time that I had to really define resilience to someone with no background knowledge of it. I'd taught resilience in the Army Reserve, studied it in depth and explored it from neurological, psychological, spiritual and existential lenses. As I struggled in the moment to concisely describe it one night over dinner, the physician sitting across from me shot back "Oh! So, it's the preventative medicine side of mental health!"

This is still the definition that I give people. In all the different ways that different disciplines study resilience and the components or skills they may break it into, at the end of the day, resilience is the preventative medicine side of caring for our mental, emotional, social, spiritual and physical selves. And the Christian life is uniquely designed to foster it.

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What Factors Contribute to Resilience?

Let me start with a few categories. Pulled from what I teach in the Army, my specific training in the neurology of trauma and resilience and clinical experience, I would break resilience into seven factors.

Community

That "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) is a fact that I could prove to you from scripture, countless psychological studies and even neurology. Human beings are wired to be more resilient to the effects of stress and trauma — and generally psychologically and emotionally healthier — when we're in a safe, healthy community.

Self-Awareness

Since Genesis 3 we have been hiding from ourselves, others and God, and the way toward healing is always the same: bring it into the light. We live in a world where we don't give much space for slow reflective thought on our emotions. Even being aware of the connection between our bodies and our emotions can be huge strides for some people. Self-awareness is vital both for healing and keeping us resilient. And it leads to our next factor.

Self-Regulation

Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Victor Frankl once said, "There is a space between stimulus and response, and in that space is freedom." More than impulse control (although that's vital as well), self-control is widening that space Frankl mentions, and being able to bring truth and our values into it.

Meaning

One of the things that Frankl noticed during his times in the concentration camps was that all the prisoners who persevered through the most horrific of circumstances had something in common: meaning. They were living for something larger than themselves and their circumstances.

Awe

Awe is being swept up in something larger than ourselves. It's feeling small and having a sense of wonder and excitement. It's also tied to a lot of positive outcomes in happiness, life satisfaction and resilience.

Gratitude

We can and should cultivate a sense of gratitude — seeing what we have with thanksgiving. People who are grateful don't necessarily have more or have better. Rather, people who are grateful see more and appreciate better.

Fluid Center

This one's trickier to describe, and I'm borrowing a term used by psychologist Kirk Schneider here. I would say that our self-concept can tend to drift two ways: we either have a rigid, inflexible view of ourselves, what "personality type" we are, never opening ourselves up to the possibility of growth or change. Or, we're constantly on a quest for identity unmoored from a sense of who we are. But resilient people don't drift to either of these extremes.

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How the Christian Life Fosters Resiliency

Now that we see the factors of resiliency, let's take a fresh look at just a few spiritual disciplines and practices of the Christian life.

Prayer, Meditation and Solitude

If Jesus often withdrew for solitude and prayer, that should be our first hint. These times are rich soil for cultivating awe. They also give us an opportunity to practice gratitude, and we can certainly learn something about ourselves here as with all the following disciplines.

Giving and Serving

Taking our eyes off ourselves and turning them toward others cultivates meaning, builds community and fosters gratitude.

Sabbath

When we take intentional time to acknowledge that we are not God, we learn to self-regulate properly and keep in perspective our place in the grand scheme of things (which develops both meaning and awe).

Community

This point writes itself. In every way from the general assembling of believers for corporate worship, to discipleship and just breaking bread and sharing life, we need to be with other people. The Christian life is a call to community.

Time in the Word

There is no better "self-assessment" than spending time in God's word. The Bible tells me who I am. It tells me what Christ by his Spirit promises to do in me. I know where I can stand firm and what parts of myself to hold with an open hand, ready to be surprised by God's work.

The Christian life supports and develops our resiliency. As we conclude, ask yourself this question: What spiritual rhythms, disciplines or practices in your life do you see fostering the resilience factors mentioned above?