

Resilience As Recovery, Not Just Resistance

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Abstract

Being a PhD candidate, qualitatively analysing transcripts of Child Sex Abuse (CSA) during lockdown, demanded resilience. As I am myself a Survivor of CSA, the potential for traumatic-distress triggering was magnified, but I felt confident, having managed my own life-course traumatic-distress with resilience practises such as gardening, walking, journaling, therapy and, of course, meditation and yoga, as my day job is teaching mindfulness-based approaches. But the pandemic handed me a further lesson in resilience when my back gave way, and I succumbed to shingles. I was shocked, disappointed even, in my body. Hubris about the strength and discipline which I hitherto conflated with resilience, realigned as I was forced to learn new ways to resilience *in the midst* of difficulty. This was a trap door through which I dropped to appreciate the resilience offered by self-compassion, self-care, receiving the kindness of others and the resultant gratitude. Resilience is as much about personal growth as personal protection. My reflective piece would discuss self-support for researchers whose work touches their own lived experience of difficulty.

As a researcher of child sex abuse resilience was always going to be important; as a survivor myself, even more so. I had thought when I started my studies, that my own life-long journey learning to manage trauma distress equipped me with resilience. In March 2020, just as Covid made muted lockdowns into reality, I had 17 transcripts from fellow survivors to analyse for my PhD and suddenly endless time and space for the task. My participant-survivors spoke of the meaning they made of interactions with service providers they experienced as untrustworthy, and listening to their struggles brought me a few more lessons in resilience.

When a survivor of abuse researches her own subject, some people will fear bias and a hindering relativism but following on the epoch changing accomplishments of feminist, disability, queer and colonial studies, “Mad Studies”, is now finding its place as a valid and respected epistemological approach. The subjective “lived experience” as it is named, of human distress and mental suffering of those working within the “Mad Studies” paradigm of research and activism is robustly informed by theoretical and philosophical foundations that win it a seat at the academic table (Beresford & Russo, 2022). People sometimes ask me, is “Mad” an acronym; it isn’t, it is a reclaiming of the word just like Queer studies and Black Lives Matter. But to generate respected scholarship, students and academics with lived experience from histories of distress, need resilience because when we have been subjected to inter-personal violence, be it as witness or directly victimised, we may be left traumatised.

Trauma is its own weird phenomena, with its own awful hallmarks: trauma runs in deep channels through the entire body, physically and mental-emotionally and small present moment occurrences which bear any resemblance to the original abuse may trigger visceral responses of overwhelm, dread, shame, pounding gut-clenching fear, avoidance, or a shutting

off into the numbness of dislocation from place and time in the “safety” of dissociation. In a nutshell, listening to other survivors talk about their experiences of abuse represents a massive challenge to resilience for a researcher living with her own history of such events.

But I felt equipped: I had built my own resilience through life-long daily meditation and yoga practices; both of which I teach. Mindfulness’s first message is to notice when the mind is not in the present moment and bring it back into contact with something, anything, ‘here’ ‘now’, be that the breath, your feet on the floor, or the sound of birds singing. From this steady place it is possible to make wise choices, to take a break, have a stretch, drink some water etc. The veracity of this simple practice of noticing and choosing a steadying focus is proven through the prolific success of mindfulness in myriad fields of human endeavour, supported by burgeoning peer reviewed research (Hölzel et al., 2011).

While analysing I used this approach all day long; knowing when I was getting overwhelmed or had shifted into fight-and-flight mechanisms of visceral clench, was the doorway through which I’d step away from it. As I worked my way through the transcripts, I used this simple but powerful tool to guide me towards taking care of myself. This, and my daily routine which has shaped my life for more than 35 years of rising early to do yoga, walk the dog in nature, meditate, and start at my computer alive with the freshness of gratitude towards what is good in this world. I make myself sound like some sort of paragon of virtue; I’m not! Trauma demanded I invested time and energy beyond the enjoyment of such things as a route to staying safe, and resilience has grown as the years went by.

Resilience isn’t just about staying safe, it is also about finding one’s way back from the knocks of adversity. I got triggered numerous times by the repeated listening to survivor experience. When in trauma distress there is an ancient Buddhist ‘linking’ practice which I use whenever I feel the rise of fear and it allows the triggered trauma distress to find its way back to grounded stability. ‘Linking’ uses self-awareness of the distress to be held in the context of the bigger picture of other present moment aspects of experience that are safe (Treleaven, 2018). This I use when teaching students and I employed the technique for myself as I sat at my desk listening and contemplating the appalling and disgusting depravity of some adults against the innocence of children, the ruination of lives and loves and human hearts in favour of selfish pleasures.

Maybe it was this, the enormity of human meanness, that tipped me: I had thought I was doing rather well with managing my resilience, but then I wasn’t. Something went under the radar of my awareness and knocked me over. A bad night with an accidental incident reminiscent of other fear filled nights triggered horror and hideous traumatic distress and well and truly ‘got me’: I succumbed to a bad back. Such small words ‘bad back’ – anyone who has had one will concur, the pain was indescribable, I have no words. But as the back pain eased and I found a way up from my nest on the sitting room floor, shingles hit. The physical pain of toxins pouring down nerve pathways was one thing but the pain to my ego was possibly equally damning! Me! All these years bouncing back from adversity, all these years teaching others to do the same. The hubris of my former self was not lost on me and came like a self-wielded machete to take out my knees from under me. Why does the inner critic feel the need to step forward just at the time when what we truly need is the loving

mother? What I needed was mother and most possibly a better version than the fallible one real life had given me. Had I got the wrong end of the stick about resilience? It began to feel that way. For me – and in many dictionary definitions, resilience is portrayed as an ability to bounce back from adversity. But this episode helped me to see that there may be an important omission in this conceptualisation: that of time frame. Looking back from the distance of nearly two years I see that I did indeed recover, but there was no bouncing! It was a slow and laborious climb out of despair and discomfort. It took many (many) small yet significant acts of self-love and self-care and self-compassion to move through and beyond. Firstly and maybe most significantly, was to befriend that ugly self-critic and help her see that while she thought she was helping by telling me off for being a flake, she really wasn't. I came to see, pretty quickly, that this part of me (my inner critic) was just as scared as the rest of me, and that her only tune was the well-worn internalised battle cry of my father, "stiffen your upper lip, nose to the grindstone" and in the spirit of the blitz, endure. I wonder if I am alone or if for others too resilience and an ignoring endurance have accidentally been conflated.

Hugging the inner critic and telling her she was also welcome at the board-room table with the many different parts of my internal world, became a crucial act of kindness to myself. Everything in me was showing up – the traumatised child, the rational academic, the spiritual mindfulness teacher, the 50-something-year-old woman who had lived through and survived other disasters. My inner yogi had to learn afresh micro-movements to discovered through all too real 'mistakes' of what was, and what was not, possible in a broken body. Patience. That, it seems to me, is the conjoined twin of resilience. All these parts now had to be listened to and included in the journey back to my desk and the transcripts. It took time. It took the help of family and friends. It took my son-in-law, and daughter, both committed Buddhist practitioners, to remind me of so many other teachings beyond mindfulness which point to freedom from pain. And there were moments (extended moments) that I more than hated. I resented the abuse that laid me open to such a downfall, and I hated the perpetrators that had handed me this path, "but honestly", my rational part would reply while metaphorically hugging my resentful prickly self, "which human do you know who hasn't got ill, had back pain, shingles and worse, much worse; what of your friends who have lived with and died from cancer?". The ancient practice of Tonglen (Chodron, 2003) became a daily friend; the knowing that I was not alone, that out there on this planet others were prostrate in pain, also crying out for help, and also being held in compassion and cared for by loved ones.

I offer this refection to other academics and students working in what has been colloquially labelled "me-search". In choosing our subject aren't we all having our interest ignited and motivated by some part of our own history? And for those working more explicitly in fields drawing on lived experience of our own suffering.

When resilience is heralded as armour plating against adversity it belies the reality of the brilliance of human hearts and minds which can recover with self-compassion, and the gentle touch of care. I am not saying that we do not bear the scars when research touches beyond our academic persona. And these scars can be opened up again and again; I know mine do, but as survivor-researchers we can rise and turn pain into the power needed to make a difference. I am happy to say that I recovered fully, will submit my thesis in the coming year,

and hope to continue to work as a survivor-researcher changing people's understanding of child sex abuse.

References

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