



# Coach resilience: What it means, why it matters and how to build it.

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## ABSTRACT

'Resilience evokes the promise of something good resulting from misfortune, hope embedded in adversity. Life rarely deals gently with humans on an indefinite basis. Sooner or later, we all grapple with some harsh issue.' (Dyer and McGuinness, 1996, p.276). This paper reviews resilience, defined as an ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges. The nature, associated attributes and significance of resilience are discussed. A number of suggestions to recover from, and indeed, thrive in the face of adversity are highlighted.

**Key words:** Resilience, Adversity, Coach.

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## INTRODUCTION

Coaching can be a rewarding and satisfying yet challenging and demanding profession (Martens, 2004). Invariably coaches will encounter a variety of difficulties during their careers, ranging from daily nuisances to major life events. There are coaches who seem to 'bounce back' effectively from negative events or situations, whereas others do not recover and are unable to move on or adapt to the changing demands of stressful experiences. An understanding of why some coaches are able to withstand, and indeed thrive on the pressures they experience can be found in 'resilience', a term that depicts an ability to positively adjust to adversity. The purpose of this paper is to examine resilience, its definition, its significance and how coaches might develop and nurture it. An understanding of coach resilience is thought to be very significant given it facilitates recovery and growing from adversity and enhances well-being.

## WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

### Defining resilience

The word resilience originates from the Latin verb *resilire* 'to leap back' or 'rebound' and is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of English as being 'able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions' (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006, p. 1498). Numerous definitions of resilience have since been proposed in the literature with a common focus on the notions of adversity and positive adaptations. Two popular definitions of resilience are:

- 'The capacity to move on in a positive way from negative, traumatic or stressful experiences' (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 320)

- 'The ability to bounce back or cope successfully despite substantial adversity' (Rutter, 1985, p. 599).

### Attributes associated with resilience

A number of qualities are associated with resilience that facilitates individuals withstanding strain and hardship and adapting to the challenging circumstances they encounter (Giordano, 1996). These qualities include resourcefulness, perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, level-headedness, flexibility, positivity, positive relationships and problem-solving and coping abilities. As described by Giordano, 'When we think of resilient people we usually describe them as resourceful, flexible and having large repertoires of problem-solving strategies. Resilient people remain organised when they experience change or stress and they recover after traumatic experiences. They are self-confident, curious, self-disciplined and adaptable' (Giordano, 1996, p. 1032).

Interestingly, optimism is thought to be one of the key factors that distinguish those who are resilient. As explained by Seligman (2011), individuals "who do not give up have a habit of interpreting setbacks as temporary, local and changeable 'It's going away quickly; it's just this one situation, and I can do something about it' (Seligman 2011, p. 102). Resilient individuals recognise there is still hope in the midst of difficulty and persist despite setbacks.

### Nature of resilience

Resilience is not an innate capacity but rather develops over time. Everyone is thought to have 'resilience potential' that can be developed at any point in one's life (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Resilience is, to a large extent, developed and shaped by challenging experiences. As explained by Walsh (2003),

'resilience refers to strengths under stress, in response to crisis, and forged through dealing with adversity' (Walsh 2003, p. 52). Further, resilience is considered 'fluid' meaning that individuals may react positively to adversity at one point in their lives but may not necessarily do so at other times.

Most noteworthy, resilience enables some individuals to emerge stronger out of adversity, with capacities that they may not have otherwise developed (Jackson, Firtko & Edenborough, 2007). For others, repeated exposure to stressful experiences can wear down their resilience. A key factor appears to be the individual's appraisal of stressful challenges or events. For those who realistically expect and accept life's difficulties are more likely to blossom and find meaning and purpose in adversity. In this context adversity can be likened to a 'wake-up call or epiphany - jolting (individuals) into the realisation of how important loved ones are, reorientating their lives and revitalising relationships' (Walsh, 2003, p. 65).

### Consequences of resilience

The beneficial outcomes of resilience can include effective coping, a sense of control, achievement and accomplishment, personal growth and well-being (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Resilient individuals have optimistic, zestful and energetic approaches to life and are less prone to burnout, depression and other stress-related health conditions. This is not to say that resilient individuals are not upset by a loss or adverse event, they are not invincible and do not pass through adversity unscathed or simply just bounce right back. Rather, they will experience pain and suffering in the process. What, however, distinguishes resilient individuals is their ability to tap into existing, latent or new resources to meet the challenges. As a result they develop strengths, new perspectives on life and stronger relationships because of the challenges (Walsh, 2003).



### Research of resilience in sport

To date, resilience has yet to be extensively investigated in sport, with the notable exceptions of two studies of 12 Olympic champions (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012) and ten US college and professional athletes (Galli & Vealy, 2008). In the latter study the researchers concluded, 'Positive outcomes mentioned by athletes included learning, gaining perspective, gaining motivation to help others, gaining a realisation of their social

support and generally being strengthened and improved because of their adversity' (Galli & Vealy, 2008, p. 327).

A review of the sport literature suggests no studies have been conducted on resilience in tennis players or coaches. Notwithstanding, there appears to be substantial anecdotal evidence that many high profile players possess a high degree of resilience. Two illustrations that come readily to mind are Rafael Nadal's comeback after knee injuries to capture his 8th French Open title and Serena Williams' 2013 French Open victory after losing in the first round of the same event the previous year and also overcoming some serious health issues.

### Strategies for building and strengthening resilience in coaches

Recently Seligman (2011) reminded us that 'the remarkable attribute of resilience in the face of defeat need not remain a mystery. It is not an inborn trait; it can be acquired' (Seligman 2011, p. 30). So what can coaches do to build and nurture resilience? Here are some suggestions that are adapted from the resilience literature (e.g. Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Jackson et al., 2007). Coaches may wish to tailor these to their own specific needs and circumstances. Suggested strategies include:

- Seek and nurture relationships and professional networks as lifelines and sounding boards - turn to, and call on, helpful others who not only offer comfort and support but also encourage your best efforts and believe in your potential to overcome difficult situations
- Share your experience(s) and help others - set up a support group, or adopt other means, to alert others to difficulties that can happen, how best to respond and what can be gained from effectively responding to adversity
- Learn to accept what has happened and cannot change - realise that events in the past simply cannot be changed. See what can be learned from the past and any mistakes/failures that may have precipitated a loss, trauma or unpleasant event
- Give yourself a purpose and develop a game plan - set clear and meaningful goals. Give yourself a reason to be motivated each day and do the best you can. Develop a set of strategies that will take you from where you are currently to where you want to be
- Get the facts - get information and establish the facts (where possible) in order to best understand difficulties, why they have arisen and what can be done
- Put in perspective - consider the worst-case scenario of any difficulty and work from this position forward. Keep things in perspective
- Take time and space - be mindful there may be no 'quick fixes' and give yourself time and space (as required) to heal and recover from pain and suffering
- Adopt 'the glass is half-full' and solution-focused approach - be optimistic and hopeful. Look for positives in what has

happened and then direct your attention to, and energies on, solutions, possibilities, opportunities and positive outcomes that will (invariably) emerge from any situation however bleak it may appear at the time

- Embrace the 'never-say-die' philosophy - commit to never giving up no matter what life throws up at you
- Practice problem-solving skills - engage in activities (e.g. crossword puzzles, card games) that keep your mind active and alert
- Audit strengths and capabilities - make a list of your personal strengths and capabilities (e.g. flexibility, courage) and regularly update the list
- Recall past successes - recall and write down those times you have displayed resilience and refer to these accounts when difficulties arise again
- Get physically fit and healthy - exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet and get sufficient sleep. Ensure balance in your life by engaging in sport and other activities of interest outside of work
- Undertake professional development - regularly upgrade your skills and qualifications (e.g. attend coaching course, presentations or tournament) Access relevant resources (e.g. Seligman's [1990] book on Learned Optimism)
- Emulate trauma survivors - take inspiration and heart from those who have endured insufferable hardship and found ways to continue with life (e.g. Nelson Mandela, survivors of terrorist attacks or natural disasters)
- Adopt humour - a smile and good laugh can be just the right tonic in testing moments.

## CONCLUSIONS

Resilience refers to effective coping and adaptation although faced with hardship, loss, stress, adversity, change and negative life events. Coaches are not immune from such experiences. While some coaches are more fortunate than others, all coaches are likely to go through very traumatic experiences such as verbal abuse from parents, financial pressures, job loss, relocation, relationship breakdown, discrimination, unexpected loss of a loved one or illness. How coaches deal with these situations can make all the difference. Many coaches are able to bounce back from adversity and successfully get on with their lives. For others these experiences bring lingering and cascading negative thoughts and feelings.

This paper highlights how to build resilience within coaches. It requires tenacity, hope, courage, optimism and, most critically, a positive mindset that accepts the inevitability of difficult situations but at the same time sees opportunities, potential, possibilities and solutions arising from such. The rewards however can be great and include (re)discovering strengths, relationships and well-being.

Could it be that adversity is a 'blessing in disguise'? Those who possess a high degree of resilience might well concur that they learned and grew from painful experiences. Coaches may well achieve something that they might not otherwise have, had adversity not struck, and had they not rallied to meet it. This is not to suggest that coaches should seek adversity but rather, when in difficult situations, they should seize the opportunity to recover and further develop competencies and skills that characterised them before facing the difficulty. Surely resilience is a worthwhile pursuit for all coaches.

In conclusion, coaches are reminded of the critical significance of resilience by Walsh (2003) who proposed resilience refers to 'making the best of things in the worst of times, seizing every opportunity' (Walsh 2003, p. 70). The worst of times can bring out the very best in a resilient coach.

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