

Michael Pittilo Students Essay Prize 2015

“What does personal and professional resilience mean to you? How could this be supported to benefit both your professional life and your patients/clients?”

An essay submitted by

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## **Introduction**

Life is characterised by inevitable difficulties, whilst some survive and get stronger, others succumb and struggle to cope (Hughes, 2012). This is more prevalent in contemporary occupational demands of some healthcare professional roles like nursing – faced with multiple stressors and pressures which could have an inextricable impact on not just the nurses but the quality of care they provide and their patients at large (McCann, et al, 2013). The famous quote by Nietzsche (1888) cited in Harrington (2012) “What does not kill me makes me stronger” suggests that the experience gained during challenges helps strengthen individuals, however research suggest that individuals are ultimately strengthened by their responding roles in times of life adversities. Whether experience or the role of the individual response, the common factor between these views is the ability to bounce back from adversity and be stronger – this factor could be described as resilience (Pipe et al, 2011).

## **Resilience – Personal and Professional**

Amidst many definitions, McCann, et al (2013) defined resilience as the ability to develop and sustain personal and professional wellbeing when faced with stress and adversities. Individuals and professionals are uniquely unique, consequently their resilience and coping strategy may differ; resilience is the personal or professional ability to persevere, adapt and bounce back when faced with tragedy, adversity, threat, trauma or significant stress (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Therefore, personal resilience is the ability to mobilise personal characteristics (skills or attributes – learned or inherent) that enable an individual to prevent, withstand, overcome and be boosted by adverse experiences and events (Mowbray, 2011). For instance, as a nursing student, against all odds, personal resilience is the ‘drive and energy’ necessary for a successful career, the willingness to learn, taking responsibility of own learning development, commitment, self-motivation, enthusiasm, flexibility and reliability (Schetter and Dolbier, 2011). In other words, it is the

determination to succeed, going an extra mile with a 'can-do' attitude, adapting to change, reflecting on experiences and performance and using ideas gathered to positively inform unfolding events (Brunel University London, 2013).

On the other hand, professional resilience is the commitment of professionals to maintain balance between life challenges and occupational stressors while fostering career sustainability and professional values (Fink-Samnick, 2009). It entails three factors; individual factors – personal skills and attributes (e.g. level of emotional stability and determination), inter-relational factors (team work, communication and social networks) and organisational factors (organisational culture and support, training opportunities) (Bogaerts, 2013). With regards to these points, to a nursing student, professional resilience could be described as the ability to 'adopt, adjust and adapt' – using personal resilience skills, attributes and other resilient support opportunities such as mentoring, clinical supervision and reflective learning in order to face, thrive through, learn and develop from the stress and pressures of working life.

Meanwhile, irrespective of the individual or profession, research suggests that an individual's personal resilience is dependent on the holistic health (emotional, physical, social, psychological and spiritual) of the individual while the professional resilience is dependent on the personal resilience plus the resilient support strategies at the workplace (Herrman et al, 2011).

### **How resilience could be supported to benefit professional life**

Arguably, leaders play an integral role in the pre and post qualification eras of nurses. Supportive leaders like mentors, preceptors, guidance tutors and line managers are role models, they uphold professional values and portray professional identity filled with optimism and enthusiasm which their subordinates try to replicate and develop (Williams, 2012). Whilst we acknowledge that leaders are already supportive to nurses; it is also worthy to point out that this support is mainly on a professional basis (Williams, 2012) whereas adding some personal support – personal resilience

strategies – that have been tested and trusted by leaders in the course of their own career, could be insightful and would be of tremendous benefit. With their personal and professional experience they could look out for warning signs for pressures and challenges in the workplace and try to pre-empt breakdown by questioning, listening, giving feedback and supporting professionals through ‘thick and thin’ (Pearn, et al , 2013). A typical example of this is clinical supervision in nursing practice – which makes nurses feel stronger, enhance thinking capacity, positive interaction amongst teams and patients, allows time and space to reflect and debrief (Cross et al, 2010). A strong positive relationship is vital to professional resilience (Murray, 2014); the resilience of a nurse will be enhanced when in constructive rapport with leaders and colleagues, it will also help the individual share ideas, gain support or even vent frustrations that might arise while tackling workplace challenges (Dean, 2012).

Bearing in mind that stress is one of the key factors that depletes resilience levels (Jackson et al, 2007), creating a workplace cultural environment that cares about professionals by giving them the opportunity to discuss their wellbeing, express concerns, dialogue critical issues and exchange vital information to benefit their preparedness for situations that may arise will ultimately help reduce stress (Wagnild and Collins, 2009). In addition, professionals could not only be supported on training and continuous professional development but could also be offered counselling. This would ensure they set their priorities right, stay focused on ambitions and build energy based on individual strengths and opportunities, rewards for achievements, praise and awards for performance and other success stories that could enhance personhood (Wallbank, 2013). Supporting professionals to embark on constructive reflection will boost their resilience levels, rather than wallow in guilt of negative events; reflection enable nurses to understand the problem and reflect on how it could be done better to benefit practice (Hodges et al, 2008) thereby reducing stress.

## **HOW RESILIENCE COULD BE SUPPORTED TO BENEFIT THE LIFE OF PATIENTS**

Aside personal health challenges, plans to combat the £30billion funding gap facing the NHS by 2020, requires patients to take more control of their healthcare (Journal of Community Nursing (JCN), 2014) this could be daunting, challenging and would no doubt impact on the resilience levels of patients. However, supporting them with the skills, ability and competence to 'stay positive' and 'take control' (Pipe et al, 2011) of their health through self-care could yield a win-win result for all the stake holders especially for the patients whose health could be at stake!

**Taking Control and Staying Positive:** When plans go wrong, maintaining a positive attitude could make a difference through the broadening of thought-action repertoires and enhancing enduring personal resources. Furthermore, optimism improves the immune function, reduces levels of stress hormone, lowers inflammatory response to stress, focuses on opportunities and strengths rather than threats and weaknesses (Pipe, et al, 2011). Understanding what is important to patients, what keeps them going (could be faith, hope, family, choice, belief) and supporting them accordingly will make them feel empowered, promote their dignity, autonomy (Brolley, 2010) and most importantly personhood – all of which are essential characteristics to build and maintain personal resilience. With effective control and positivity, patients will be more confident and in a better position to manage their health either by taking appropriate self-care of ongoing illness e.g checking blood pressure, diabetics checking blood sugars, taking medication as prescribed etc, or adapting their lifestyle to cope with the illness or making efforts to prevent looming preventable illnesses.

**Confidence/Purposefulness/Adaptability:** Kosman (2014) submitted that it is easy to get distracted from main objectives amongst many activities happening at the same time. Being purposeful will enhance the ability to focus on the bigger picture which will in turn challenge an individual to build the tenacious confidence necessary to face the challenges that might impede on this objective. Over time, this process will develop into adaptability. This could be achieved by developing and promoting patient's resilience paradigms like social networks – where patients could share ideas regarding their

illness and management strategies, this will be of particular benefit to patients with similar health concern, through education – where patients could gain better insight into their diagnosis, treatment and care (Neenan, 2009). Meanwhile, patients do not necessarily have to face adversity to benefit from resilience. They could be supported to build resilience against avoidable adversities through health promotion strategies (e.g. healthy eating, exercising), illness and communicable disease prevention (e.g. immunisation vaccination, infection prevention and control, maintaining safe and effective hygiene practice) (Kosman, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Summarily, the concept of resilience is overwhelmingly beneficial to individuals both in personal and professional life, especially when the core factors on which resilience is dependent are intact and well supported. However, research suggests that there is a great discrepancy on strategies to support and boost resilience; this is due to the uniqueness of individuals and professionals. Consequently, an insight into the holistic health of a particular individual alongside knowing the pros and cons of the individual's profession will give room for appropriate and effective resilience support strategies to benefit their personal and professional life.

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