

Title

“The skill of bouncing back: a toolkit for developing resilience in academia”.

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Abstract

This chapter explores the practice of developing resilience through a discussion of our own experiences of facing adversity. Within the context of academia, we discuss how we can prepare to respond with resilience to hardships. This includes a discussion of vulnerability, cultivating a positive, growth mindset, and observing resilience in others. Moving forward, we focus on responding with resilience and we present a range of practical approaches for developing resilience. We highlight the importance of practice in developing resilience, sharing the load, being selective with focus and engaging in reflection. In conclusion, we provide several key lessons, informed by our own experience, on how individuals can proactively prepare and effectively respond to challenges, thereby developing their resilience.

Introduction

The oak fought the wind and was broken,

The willow bent when it must and survived –

Robert Jordan

In an academic landscape that continues to ask more and more of scholars, with increasing metrics to be measured and expanding standards to be met, developing resilience is more critical now than ever before. As academics, we must master the skill of bouncing back from adversity; of moving forward not just despite but in virtue of the challenges we face (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Like the elastic band that

returns to shape after being stretched and contorted, we as academics must strive to be supple and quick to recover. However, in our experience, to truly develop resilience we must go beyond simply returning to our former shape. Rather, we must view the hardships we face as an opportunity to reach a new and ultimately improved form, having learned something about ourselves or our professional environment along the way. It is this proactive, dynamic, and engaged version of resilience, which centres on the ability to adapt, learn and progress when faced with challenges, that we discuss in this chapter (Brendan *et al.*, 2023).

We begin the chapter by outlining our context for developing resilience. Next, we turn to consider how we have prepared for resilience. Following this, we discuss ways in which we have responded with resilience. Finally, we end with a summary of some key lessons that we have learned on developing resilience that we wish to share with others.

Our context for developing resilience

Resilience can be developed through a range of life experiences. In this chapter, we explore resilience through our personal experiences of the UK higher education sector and the many challenges that we as academics face. Through this context we discuss the hardships we have experienced and how we overcame these by applying our coping mechanisms. For instance, we discuss resilience in relation to receiving feedback on our research, the review process, leading research teams, managing teaching commitments, and experiences of working with others.

Preparing for resilience

For us, resilience involves how we react in challenging situations and, as such, it seems to require lived experiences of hardship. However, in our experience, developing resilience ought not to begin at the first sign of a challenge. Rather, we have found that there are actions we can take and decisions we can make to better prepare ourselves to be resilient so that, when we are exposed to distressing situations, we are well placed to respond.

Vulnerability

One of these differentiating factors is the skill of vulnerability. Although vulnerability may be overlooked by some as a skill, we find that allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, particularly in relation to research, teaching and learning, has helped us to develop resilience in these areas. As academics, we often face many difficulties throughout our careers such as having our work rejected for publication or being unsuccessful in a grant application.

When faced with such challenges in the past, we have been required to make a decision regarding vulnerability. We could either allow ourselves to be vulnerable by engaging in the challenge, thus risking what could feel like failure or, we could avoid the situation altogether and seemingly avert

disappointment. Early in our academic roles, our response was to shy away from such ventures as it was better, we reasoned, to avoid the risk of hardship and perceived failure that could follow. However, from our experience we have learned that it is only by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, by facing the fear and by choosing to expose ourselves to challenges, regardless of the potential outcome, that we can hope to progress and move forward.

An example of when we have progressed through practicing vulnerability was when we submitted a proposal to present at an international conference in America and to be considered for a prestigious award at this conference. Putting time, effort, and care into writing the application was daunting as we had to accept the fact that we might not be successful. By putting ourselves forward, we opened ourselves up to fail and hence, we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable. In this instance our application was successful, and we learned that when we choose to avoid vulnerability we may safeguard ourselves from failure, but we also avoid the opportunity to succeed.

Of course, it is not always the case that practicing vulnerability leads to an obvious and immediate success. For example, we have experienced challenging paper revision processes including six rejections on a particular paper. Each time that we have recrafted the paper and resubmitted it to a journal for review we have been required to embrace our vulnerability. Despite the initial feeling of failure that we experience each time the paper is rejected, the experience is still valuable as it provides us with an opportunity to practice and develop our resilience.

Therefore, even when the outcome is seemingly negative, practicing vulnerability fosters our progression as each challenge and perceived failure develops our resilience. Hence, as much as resilience does demand a certain kind of strength, in our experience, that strength is born out of our willingness to take a chance, to risk failure, and to embrace our vulnerability, whatever the outcome may be.

A positive growth mindset

When faced with a hurdle so high that we begin to doubt ourselves and that requires resilience, it is important that we adopt a positive, growth mindset. An example of a hurdle we have faced is receiving our first journal review on a paper which highlighted numerous areas for improvement. This led us to question our ability and understanding. Initially, instead of acting on the feedback and editing the work to address the reviewers' comments, we concentrated on the negative aspects of the comments. Rather than viewing the comments as constructive, we used the perceived negativity as a reason to stall the progress of the paper and to procrastinate. However, after attending a publishing workshop at our place of work, we experienced a shift in mindset. During the event, senior academics shared their experiences of publishing and the setbacks they had faced and particularly, how they had adopted a positive mindset when reviewing feedback from editors. This fresh perspective from the senior academics, that focused on how we can use feedback to strengthen our work, helped us to initiate a positive mindset.

This example reflects that, when faced with a challenge, two types of mindsets can emerge. Firstly, we can respond by focusing on the error and negativity of the situation. In this case, the challenge is an ordeal that may take much mental and physical processing to overcome. This type of mindset is limiting and often restricts our ability to grow and develop. From a short-term perspective, we are prevented from tackling the issue at hand and our thinking processes may become stuck, leading to us being unable to move on and accept making changes. An alternative mindset: a positive, growth mindset, is one where we take time to absorb the feedback and to view it as an opportunity for development. For us, adopting a positive, growth mindset in relation to receiving feedback involves reading the feedback, reflecting on this by ourselves and with others, and then creating action points of how we can use the feedback to develop our work.

In relation to the previous example, when a positive, growth mindset was adopted, we were able to view the reviewer's feedback as an opportunity to learn and grow as researchers. The feedback encouraged us to think about our research with an improved academic understanding and enabled us to develop our work. For instance, when revising the paper, we deepened our understanding of the theoretical concepts used, repositioned our rationale to evidence rigour, and demonstrated a greater contribution to knowledge. Hence, a positive, growth mindset, that seeks to flourish from difficult experiences and that views challenges as an opportunity to improve, is key to developing our resilience as academics.

Resilience in others

In previous sections we have alluded to a 'self-help' approach to developing resilience which includes looking within yourself to find strength. However, resilience can also be built by reaching out to and learning from others. This, we have found, is particularly useful when dealing with imposter syndrome. As imposter syndrome can impact our mindset and particularly how we feel about ourselves and our work, we have found that it can be difficult to remain positive and practice resilience when experiencing this. We have found that when we are struggling with imposter syndrome a useful way to remain resilient is by reaching out to others and learning from how they demonstrate resilience.

An instance where we learned from and were inspired by others' resilience was when our funding bid to deliver a workshop with a colleague was rejected. Initially, we felt overwhelmed by the feedback. We felt it confirmed our anxiety that we are not good enough and we wanted to disregard the proposal. Instead of choosing a positive mindset and learning from the experience, we perceived the feedback negatively and were not prepared to learn from the suggestions given. That was until speaking with our colleague about the rejection and the insights they had taken from this. Our colleague reflected constructively upon the feedback whilst sharing their past experiences of rejections, which inspired us to see the feedback in a different light. Their resilient attitude on how the proposal could have been improved and their encouraging guidance on making future bids together deepened our comprehension of responding positively to adversity and learning from the experience.

As well as observing and learning from the resilience of other academics, we have also developed resilience through conversation with friends and family. For instance, when we first started working in academic roles after completing our doctorates, we struggled to juggle our research alongside our teaching responsibilities, and this led to us feeling overwhelmed. From speaking to loved ones, we learned more about their experiences of approaching a new challenge in life and how they had weathered each storm. This demonstrated to us that there is a great deal we can learn about resilience from our personal networks that can be applied to our experiences in academia. Resilient techniques that we learned from our family and friends that we applied to develop our own resilience included starting new hobbies to help us relax and adopting reflection and mindfulness.

Responding with resilience

Once we have prepared for resilience, we must then engage with the arguably more challenging demand of responding with resilience when faced with adversity. In our experience, this is concerned with the time that precedes a challenging encounter, that requires action and in which resilience physically is or is not exhibited. Through our experience, we have learned that there are several ways we can take an active role in our resilience response thereby ensuring that, when we do face the challenges that will inevitably come, we are able to respond with resilience.

Practicing resilience

As we have already seen, resilience can enable us to adapt to challenging situations, cope with stress, and embrace change. Resilience helps us to navigate the ups and downs of academia, ensuring that we do not get stuck in a negative mindset or succumb to the many pressures that come our way. However, from our experience, resilience is not something that we can expect to develop on its own accord. Instead, developing resilience demands our active participation, consistent effort, and continual practice. As the saying goes, ‘practice makes perfect’ and this, we believe, applies to resilience.

From our experience, we have found that when practicing resilience, it can help to adopt a ‘fake it until you make it’ mentality. When a challenging situation occurs, we sometimes struggle to interpret the experience as an opportunity for growth and we cannot see – or we do not wish to see – how to learn from it. For us, this is typically the case when the situation is emotionally charged for instance, when we are deeply invested in a project or when, perhaps for external reasons such as issues in our personal life, we feel more sensitive. In such circumstances we have found that we can and should practice resilience, even if that means initially faking a resilient response.

For example, amidst positive feedback in our module evaluation feedback, we received some more constructive feedback that could be perceived negatively. Upon reading the feedback, we felt defensive, and we did not see the feedback as a fantastic opportunity for self-development. For a multitude of reasons, a genuine resilience response seemed unattainable in that moment. However,

despite not truly feeling resilient, we acted as though we were, and we feigned what we considered to be a resilient response. For instance, we verbalised that we felt positive about the feedback to ourselves and to others even when that wasn't wholly true. We have found that feigning a resilient response to a negative experience such as this has enabled us to visualise ourselves being resilient which in turn, helped to transform a negative and unhelpful inner narrative into a more positive one. Thus, we have found that this 'fake it until you make it' approach to practicing resilience is a powerful way to develop resilience when a genuine resilient response seems out of our grasp.

Sharing the load

Research is often viewed as an independent and lonely activity: a single person's pursuit to achieve a deeper understanding and to enrich current thinking. In the past, we have adopted the perspective that we must deal with challenges independently as asking for help might be perceived as a weakness. For instance, when starting a new job at the start of our academic career, we did this to demonstrate to our peers and line managers that we were confident leading on tasks. However, our experience has taught us that taking this view is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, our work as academics need not be an independent pursuit as collaboration is key to developing excellent research. Secondly, attempting to manage everything on our own can be a major inhibitor to developing resilience.

We have found that sharing the load with others, whether that is discussing the emotional burden of the challenge we are experiencing, or sharing the physical workload that is involved in the said challenge, is particularly useful. This is particularly helpful for early-career academics such as ourselves as we may be less well-versed in dealing with failures – if these are indeed failures. That being said, the importance of sharing the load is also relevant for academics of all career stages. For instance, as we have progressed in our roles to adopt leadership responsibilities, we have further learned the importance of sharing the load through, for example, delegation of workload and not saying 'yes' to everything.

Furthermore, sharing the load is important as we have found that resilience is more difficult to exhibit when we are tired and burned out. This is because the factors required to develop resilience, such as those discussed in this chapter, require great effort. Sharing the load ensures that, when we do face challenges, we have the strength to respond resiliently. An example of when we have shared the load was when we allocated specific roles amongst our research team, rather than taking them all on ourselves. In this scenario, we were able to lighten what might have been an overwhelming burden and, in doing so, invited different perspectives, highlighted new ways of thinking, and freed up our emotional, mental, and physical capacity to deal with any challenges that arose.

We learned that strong communication, a sense of trust and a positive rapport between colleagues is crucial for sharing the load. When such a relationship and camaraderie is established, sharing the load allows us to be open to others' thinking and provides a safe space to share our own doubts with the purpose of inviting others' suggestions and support.

Being selective with focus

Another key aspect of developing our resilience has been ensuring that we are selective with our focus. Whilst we should certainly not ignore the adversity or the negativity that we experience, it is important that we direct our efforts to the aspects of the situation that we can change. Being consumed by factors that we cannot control can lead to stagnation and can stifle our opportunity to develop resilience, as we find ourselves rooted in what can feel like an unmovable situation. However, in these cases, we have found that we are never really stuck but instead, we are focusing on that which is stuck. Shifting our focus to what we can control can present a brilliant opportunity to rewrite the narrative and practice some of the key elements of resilience previously discussed, such as adopting a positive, growth mindset.

For example, when we first applied to undertake doctoral study, we experienced rejections from numerous funded PhD opportunities. Our first response was to feel downhearted and negative and to concentrate on everything that went wrong with our application. Mostly, we focused on the decision-makers in the process and why they didn't deem our application a success. However, we found that in these moments we had to remind ourselves that we could not change the panels response to our interview and thus, there was little to no point focusing on that aspect of the experience. Instead, what we could influence was our reaction to their response.

Rather than directing our focus and expending our energy on circumstances that we had no control over, we chose to be selective with our focus. This involved focusing constructively on the feedback we received to determine what we could learn from the situation and what we could feed forward. For instance, when the response from our application included that we needed a more comprehensive understanding of the existing research in our proposed area of study, we chose to direct our efforts on addressing this requirement. That meant taking time away to engage in further reading and widen our knowledge base so that, when we did apply for a different role, we did so as more developed scholars.

Notably, ensuring that we are selective with our focus when faced with adversity is significant as, as we have seen from the discussion so far, preparing for and practicing resilience takes substantial work and commitment. Thus, being selective with focus and investing our time and efforts into those factors that we can affect is important as it ensures that we have sufficient energy to practice and ultimately develop, resilience.

Reflection

To keep moving forward in our careers, we have had to engage in reflection. Crucially, self-compassion and mindfulness ought to be central to our self-reflections. We have found that we must confront our past experiences without judgement, even – or especially – when reflecting on situations where we know we could have responded more resiliently. By being mindful, we can remind ourselves that

hardships are an inevitable and essential part of life as an academic and that our worth and value are not determined by our ability to easily overcome challenges. This perspective, that involves noticing and taking stock of our feelings and reactions towards the experience and practicing being kind to ourselves, has encouraged us to continue learning from our experiences and developing our resilience.

Reflecting on each challenging experience, whether it is an unwelcome response from a member of our teaching team or a rejection from a conference, has allowed us to learn from the hardship and make positive changes for the future. For instance, after we have faced difficulties we have reflected on whether we interpreted the experience personally or whether we were able to respond to it objectively or, whether we focused more on the negatives of the situation rather than the potential positives. In this way, reflection gives us a second opportunity to focus on and practice the different elements outlined in this chapter that are central to developing resilience.

One challenging experience that we have had to reflect on was when we struggled to engage and recruit participants to take part in our research. As their involvement was essential to the progression of our research, it was frustrating that participants were not willing to engage, and the challenge made us question and doubt the future of our project. However, through reflection, we identified areas of our own behaviour and research practices that could be improved. In this instance, our reflection led us to determine that the way we were approaching potential participants could be improved, as could the information we were sharing with them. This reflection allowed us to get a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our approach which, in turn, led to us improving that approach and ultimately, finding the participants we needed to progress the research.

Hence, by engaging in reflection and by critically considering our reactions to past challenging experiences, we have been able to identify moments when we have been too quick to react, have taken the challenging experience to heart, or have failed to see the path ahead. Through reflection we have addressed these problematic, resilience-inhibiting responses so that, when faced with similar challenges again in the future, we are able to respond more positively.

Lessons we have learned on developing our resilience

Our short summary offers a list of key learnings that we wish to share with others and that we believe, when adopted, can assist individuals in their development of resilience. The order reflects that in which we discussed them, rather than a suggestion of importance or priority.

- Allow yourself to be vulnerable and put yourself out there, despite the perceived risk of failure.
- Adopt a positive, growth mindset when embarking on ventures that might require resilience.
- Observe resilience in others and learn from their example.
- Actively practice resilience, even when that initially requires a feigned resilient response.
- Share the mental and physical load through building trusted, strong networks and collaborations.

- Be selective with your focus by being attentive to the positives as well as the perceived negatives and prioritise what you can change.
- Reflect compassionately on each challenging situation.

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