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Resilience

From Surviving to Thriving

Dr Lucy Hone brings years of research, as well as her own personal experience with tragedy, to the conversation about resilience.



PHOTO: TESSA BURROWS

After a life-changing tragedy in her own family, resilience expert and researcher Dr Lucy Hone is uniquely placed to understand exactly what strategies really help when overcoming adversity.

Dr Hone, co-director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience (NZIWR), shared both her personal experience and what science knows about resilience in “From Surviving to Thriving”, a free online event, in October. The webinar aimed to help build mental wellbeing in Melbourne’s eastern region, and was organised by community agencies in conjunction with six local councils including Yarra Ranges Council.

Lucy Hone studied resilience in 2009-2010 at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and later attained her PhD in positive psychology and public health from Auckland’s AUT university. After completing her studies in Philadelphia and returning to her home in NZ, Lucy began putting her studies to work, teaching resilience-boosting strategies to communities devastated by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. She felt that by helping the people of her community, she had found her “personal resilience calling”.

Unfortunately, navigating tragedy with resilience became much more personal for Lucy—a devastating event changed the course of her life and work. In May 2014, Trevor and Lucy Hone’s 12-year-old daughter Abi was killed in a car accident, along with two close family friends. In an instant, Lucy went from being resilience expert and researcher to suddenly finding herself on the other side of the equation. Now she was a grieving mother, facing the darkest days of her life.

After the loss of her daughter, Lucy questioned the advice of grief experts who told her to expect years of overwhelming grief and possible family estrangement. Needing to find hope and a way through the pain, she turned to her resilience research and evidence-based strategies to help her family navigate such a painful loss. “When Abi died, I had this voice in my head that said: choose life, not death; don’t lose what you have to what you have lost,” said Lucy. “We had two beautiful sons—they were 14 and 15 at the time. They really needed us right then... I became absolutely determined to tune into them rather than having all of my attention swallowed up by Abi’s loss.”

Presenting the webinar from New Zealand, Lucy spoke about the ways of thinking and acting that continue to help her cope with parental bereavement, and about what the best research has shown about resilience.

What is resilience?

Dr. Karen Reivich¹, director of training programs at the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center, defines resilience as “coping with adversity and learning from it.” Lucy urged the audience to learn more about themselves during challenging times such as the Melbourne lockdown, and to understand what ways of thinking and acting help them when things are tough.

Why is resilience important?

Karen Reivich teaches that human beings use resilience in four different ways:

- to overcome obstacles of childhood, such as poverty, abuse or neglect
- to steer through everyday adversities such as road rage and workplace difficulties
- to navigate major life events and losses such as death, illness, or relationship changes



PHOTOS: DENISE/PHOTOS

Helping others and having supportive relationships can help increase our personal resilience

Can anyone be resilient?

“The science shows that resilience isn’t an elusive trait that some people have and some people don’t,” Lucy explained. “Resilience is a capacity that resides within us all, and it requires what Anne Masten calls ordinary magic.”² While genetics do play a part, personal resilience is largely influenced by our thoughts, actions and connections. With the help of self-knowledge and deliberate action, resilience can be developed. Research also confirms that the skills of resilience can be taught.

- to reach out, learn, and take on new challenges in a proactive, rather than reactive, way.

“It is our resilience that enabled us all to carry on functioning okay even when our world was turned upside down this year,” said Lucy. “All of the working from home, suddenly not being able to go to the office, not being able to go to the gym, meet with friends and family, being forced to do things really differently—that is your real-time resilience in action.”

¹ Dr. Reivich is a leading expert in the fields of resilience, depression prevention and positive psychology, and is the lead instructor and curriculum developer for the Penn Resilience Programs. ppc.sas.upenn.edu/people/karen-reivich

² Anne Masten was one of the earliest researchers in the field of resilience and is a professor at the Institute for Child Development at the University of Minnesota. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Masten

What are the characteristics of resilience?

In the early 2000s, biological psychiatrist Dr Dennis Charney³ conducted in-depth interviews with American airmen who had been prisoners of war in North Vietnam's infamous Hoa Lo Prison (known as the "Hanoi Hilton") during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite their years of incarceration, many of the men never experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or mental illness, and managed to lead effective, functional lives. Dr Charney's research, published in 2005, identified the following critical contributors to the airmen's resilience:

- optimistic thinking
- helping others
- having a moral compass
- faith/spirituality
- humour
- having a role model
- strong supportive relationships
- facing fear
- having a strong sense of meaning in life.



Lucy pointed out that all of the above factors are what Ann Masten refers to as "ordinary magic" and that many of them relate to connections with "someone, or something, bigger than yourself." Each person will have different ingredients for success or have those ingredients in different quantities: "As long as you have got some of them, and you're aware of the things that help you cope with adversity, then you're on the right track."

How can we practise resilience?

NZIWR has created a "toolkit" of four coping strategies⁴ that may seem simple, but are

backed by rigorous research and science. Lucy has found these strategies to be "profoundly effective" in her own difficult times, especially after the death of her daughter and friends, but also for coping with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Understand that struggle is part of life

Acknowledge that adversity happens to all of us, and cultivate self-compassion. "Do whatever works for you to really value yourself and be kind enough to yourself to say, okay, this is a tough moment, what do I need to do to be kind to myself right now?" said Lucy. Harsh self-criticism is demotivating, yet studies show that more than 76 percent of us are nicer to others than to ourselves.

2. Choose where you focus your attention

People who demonstrate a capacity for resilience seem to be able to accept the things they are incapable of changing, and focus their attention on what they can change. Concentrating on what is still good

in your world will counteract the negativity bias that encourages us to notice all the bad things. Develop habits that help you tune into the positive things in life.

3. Ask yourself: is this helping or harming me?

This strategy is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or talk therapy, which trains people to question whether the ways they are thinking and acting are hindering or helping them in their efforts to get through whatever is troubling them. Asking this question puts you back in control.

4. Don't catastrophise

Try not to indulge in "runaway train" thinking. Dispute your irrational thinking in the same way that a friend would if you dared to voice those inner thoughts out loud. Ask yourself what is the best-case or worst-case scenario, and realise that the most likely outcome is somewhere in the middle. Distract yourself or try techniques such as slow, deep breathing, to give your thinking brain enough time to catch up with your overly emotional, irrational brain.

While the above strategies will help us build our personal resilience, external factors are also important. Lucy pointed out that resilience is also dependent on the environment in which we live, making it more difficult for those who are disadvantaged in society. "It relies upon us having organisations and community structures, good justice, health and education systems, lack of racism, unity, equity and a sense of belonging as well."

Six years after the tragic death of Abi, Lucy knows that it is possible to navigate adversity and to make yourself act in ways that will help you through life's toughest times. She emphasised that the most important findings of resilience research are that we do it together and that we understand we do have choices—that our capacity for resilience is, to a large degree, a direct result of the way we choose to think, and choose to act, in everyday moments.

Lucy acknowledged that Melbourne has had it especially tough during the global pandemic due to the city's lengthy lockdown. She concluded her presentation by encouraging the audience to adopt a survivor's mentality and to understand that what we are facing is a marathon, not a sprint. "Keep building the self-awareness of what is working for you and those you care for, and through that self-awareness you can build up a powerful resource toolbox that will help you in the weeks and the months ahead."

Janet Van Dijk

Originally from London, Dr Lucy Hone has called New Zealand home for nearly two decades. She is a director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience (NZIWR), adjunct senior fellow at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, an internationally published academic researcher, and best-selling author. Dr Hone's PhD dissertation was acknowledged for its outstanding contribution to wellbeing science at the 2019 World Congress of Positive Psychology in Melbourne, and her research has been published in several peer-reviewed academic journals. Her work has been featured in documentaries around the world, and her TED talk "Three secrets of resilient people" has had more than 2 million views. Dr Hone helps design and implement wellbeing and resilience strategies for government departments, companies, and schools. In 2017 Dr Hone wrote Resilient Grieving, and in 2020 she co-authored The Educators' Guide to Whole-school Wellbeing with her NZIWR co-director, Dr Denise Quinlan.

You can connect with NZIWR through Facebook, Instagram or the NZIWR website: facebook.com/NZIWR/, @bringing_wellbeing_to_life, and nziwr.co.nz.

³ Dennis Charney is a world expert in the neurobiology and treatment of mood and anxiety disorders. He is Professor of Psychiatry, Professor of Neuroscience, Professor of Pharmacology, and Dean of New York's Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_S._Charney

⁴ NZIWR™ Real-time Resilience Toolkit: nziwr.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NZIWR_Real-time_Resilience_Coping_with_Coronavirus.pdf