OPINION

# Put down the self-help books. Resilience is not a DIY endeavour

MICHAEL UNGAR
CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED 55 MINUTES AGO

1 COMMENT

ILLUSTRATION BY XULIN WANG

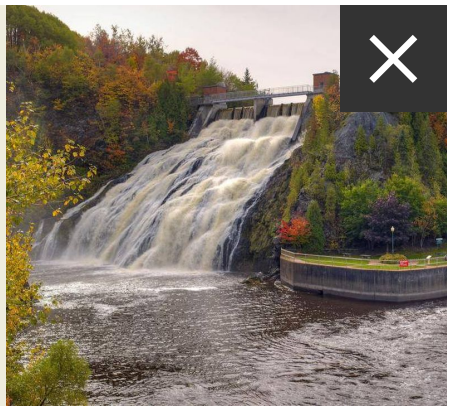
*Michael Ungar is the Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience, a professor of social work at Dalhousie University and a family therapist. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including* Change Your World: The Science of Resilience and the True Path to Success, *from which this essay is adapted.*

At a conference about resilience in Brisbane, Australia, I shared a stage with a charismatic speaker named Todd Sampson, who calls himself a "bodyhacker." He had recently travelled the world training his very ordinary brain to be extraordinary, filming his miraculous acts of courage, endurance and mind control for a television series. People sat spellbound as he described, among other feats, climbing Mount Everest without an oxygen tank. "Our brains are powerful tools," he told us. "Anyone with a little motivation can train themselves to do great things."

Posing as an everyman in low-rise jeans and T-shirt, Mr. Sampson told us how we, too, could remake our minds, improve our resilience and perform heroic physical acts such as climbing a 120-metre chimney in the desert surrounding Moab, Utah, even leaping between two ledges – blindfolded.

Like everyone at the conference, I wanted to be inspired by Mr. Sampson, but watching his film crew document his astonishing feats, I knew that not one of us had a hope in hell of climbing a mountain blindfolded. It was all a bad misrepresentation of what scientists know about resilience.





While Mr. Sampson was certainly brave to climb blindfolded, he was already an accomplished mountaineer before he tried this stunt. He was also led up that 120-metre climb by someone he described as one of the best mountaineers in the world, with a crew of

technical experts. The camera was focused on Mr. Sampson while the people who were coaching him were on the periphery. Mr. Sampson has more courage than I ever will, but saying, as he did, that he got up that mountain by rewiring his brain is like saying that the airplane I took to Australia got me there on its own, when in reality it needed a worldwide network of airports, satellites, government treaties, integrated businesses and the many professionals who design and build planes and who train to be pilots.

Mindfulness, neuroplasticity, trauma-informed cognitive behavioural therapy, psychoanalysis, career coaching, Kripalu yoga – the list of "cures" for our lack of resilience and related problems is endless. If you are overweight, alone, miserable at work or crippled by stress or anxiety or depression, there are hordes of gurus and experts chasing you with books and quick fixes. With their advice, guidance, motivation or inspiration, you can fix your problems.

But make no mistake: They are always your problems. You alone are responsible for them. It follows that failing to fix your problems will always be your failure, your lack of will, motivation or strength.

Galen, the second-century physician who ministered to Roman emperors, believed his medical treatments were effective. "All who drink of this treatment recover in a short time," he wrote, "except those whom it does not help, who all die. It is obvious, therefore, that it fails only in incurable cases." This is the way of the billion-dollar self-help industry: You are to blame when the guru's advice does not produce the expected outcome, and by now, we are all familiar enough with self-help to know that expected outcomes are elusive.

We take upon ourselves the task of becoming motivated and subject ourselves to the heavy lifting of personal transformation. We mostly fail. We gain back the weight that we lost. Our next relationship is just as bad as the one we left. Our attitudes improve, but the boss is still a jerk.

I enjoy an inspiring TED Talk as much as anyone. I love that "Ah ha!" moment when I gain some new insight into myself or, at the very least, better understand why everyone else is so dysfunctional. I want to believe that attainments as complex as success, happiness, love and meaning can be attributed to a short list of personal traits such as virtue, faith, perseverance, self-control, grit and positive thinking; that if I just listen to the right podcasts

or sign up for the right courses, I will discover hidden strengths and the happy life that is waiting to burst from inside me.

I, too, wish life were as simple as it is described in the first chapter of Eckhart Tolle's bestselling book *The Power of Now*. It opens with the story of a beggar sitting on a box. A stranger comes along and asks the beggar what's inside. The beggar, who has sat on the box for years, has never thought to open it. When finally he does, it is full of gold. Thus we are all beggars seeking something from someone else when everything we need is already there inside us.

But stories such as this are misleading, if not dishonest. Personal explanations for success actually set us up for failure. TED Talks and talk shows full of advice on what to eat, what to think and how to live seldom work. Self-help fixes are like empty calories: The effects are fleeting and often detrimental in the long term. Worse, they promote victim blaming. The notion that your resilience is your problem alone is ideology, not science.

We have been giving people the wrong message. Resilience is not a DIY endeavour. Self-help fails because the stresses that put our lives in jeopardy in the first place remain in the world around us even after we've taken the "cures." The fact is that people who can find the resources they require for success in their environments are far more likely to succeed than individuals with positive thoughts and the latest power poses.

What kind of resources? The kind that get you through the inevitable crises that life throws our way. A bank of sick days. Some savings or an extended family who can take you in. Neighbours or a congregation willing to bring over a casserole, shovel your driveway or help care for your children while you are doing whatever you need to do to get through the moment. Communities with police, social workers, home-care workers, fire departments, ambulances and food banks. Employment insurance, pension plans or financial advisers to help you through a layoff.

Striving for personal transformation will not make us better when our families, workplaces, communities, health-care providers and governments fail to provide us with sufficient care and support. The science shows that all the internal resources we can muster are seldom of much use without a nurturing environment. Furthermore, if those resources are not immediately at hand, we are better off trying to change our world to gain those resources

than we are trying to change ourselves.

For more than 20 years, I have been a family therapist working with hard-to-reach young people while also holding a research chair that has let me to study resilience around the world. The Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University, which I lead, investigates why some people "beat the odds" and do far better than expected. Unlike many other research centres, our team is focused not on personal traits but on social and physical ecologies – the natural environments in which we live – and how these create well-resourced individuals who make success look easy.

Our research shows that even the worst problems are not beyond the control of individuals if we think about changing environments more than changing ourselves. Here's an example from someone you will never see in a TED Talk.

Akiko had just turned 18 a week before March 11, 2011. That was the day a 9.1-magnitude earthquake shook the seabed off the northeastern coast of Japan at a depth of more than 20,000 metres below the ocean surface. The result was a towering wave that destroyed the town of Yamada, where Akiko (I've changed her name to preserve her identity) lived with her parents. She was in a car with a friend on her way to school when she heard the tsunami alarm. Stuck in traffic, the car was tossed like a rubber dinghy until it became submerged. Akiko's friend was knocked unconscious and drowned. Akiko managed to break the window and swim up through the debris, gasping for air as she dodged floating cars and pieces of concrete falling around her. She was the only one in her immediate family to survive.

A photographer who happened to be on a nearby hillside caught several pictures of Akiko swimming in the very chilly water until she was able to hoist herself onto the roof of a four-storey building that had miraculously remained standing. Akiko remembers cutting her hands on the sharp metal of a drainage pipe before she was able to break free of the eddies that kept pulling her under. Once on the roof, she braced herself against a ventilation fan and waited 12 shivering hours for the water to recede and rescue crews to arrive. She recalls being lifted by helicopter through a haze of acrid smoke from the dozens of fires that had started when natural gas pipes ruptured.

By every measure of risk, Akiko should have been traumatized by her experience. When I

met her, a year and a half later, she was still having nightmares but she was attending school, completing her high-school credits and considering her options for postsecondary education. She was housed with an aunt who had lost her husband. Together they occupied a small temporary home fashioned from portable trailers. Long rows of squat, steel-sided units had been placed end to end on a soccer field next to the high school. Each home had its own hot plate and toilet. Akiko did not have much good to say about her aunt but she also knew she did not have many other options for housing. At least she had been resettled in her community and was back in high school. That meant she could spend time with her friends, who all had tales of their own harrowing survival from the day their world had drowned.

A number of non-governmental organizations had arrived in Yamada in the months following the disaster. It was at an NGO that Akiko and I were introduced. Its program provided evening and Saturday tutoring for students whose families could no longer afford to send their children to regular after-school classes. For most Japanese youth, I was told, the normal school day provides them with only a small portion of their lessons. Additional instruction is a part of most children's lives, especially for students whose parents expect their kids to go on to college.

How had Akiko managed to keep going, to avoid the debilitating, paralyzing effects of living in such a chaotic situation for so many months? Why had the deaths of her friend and immediate family, and her own near drowning, not left her with more evident emotional scars? Listening to Akiko tell her story, I learned how she and other children and adults such as her could be protected from the more damaging effects of extreme loss and a cascade of potentially traumatizing events.

While Akiko was not exuberant or deeply insightful, she spoke clearly about the routines she had in her life and the continuity she experienced between who she was before the tsunami and who she was 18 months later. There was also the sameness of her peer group and school environment. Placement with her aunt, though far from wonderful, meant a sense of identity as a member of a family and a culture. The interventions of government agencies and non-governmental service providers had also given Akiko a sense of hope for the future. No one, it seemed, was providing individual psychotherapy or masking the trauma with sports and other forms of play. Not that these things would have been bad –

they just did not seem necessary.

As a colleague of mine, Keiji Akiyama, explained to me when I puzzled over Akiko's success, her life still resembled that of many other young Japanese, regardless of the tsunami that had destroyed their town. It was a simple lesson in resilience.

Obliterate the world around us, and one person in a thousand might maintain an optimistic outlook in life, more by chance than design. Put in place the resources needed by an entire population of displaced, traumatized individuals, and the majority will regain normal functioning in a short period of time, so long as those resources are culturally and contextually relevant.

No wonder, then, that when I asked Mr. Akiyama why the service providers were only offering tutoring programs instead of recreation and psychosocial programming, he looked at me confused, cocking his head to the side. "Why would we want our children wasting their time playing?" he asked. It was a revelation for me. We cannot separate culture from the resources people need to cope with traumatic experiences. As long as Akiko and her peers were being treated like "normal" kids, they were being protected from the dangerous consequences of extreme loss: the physical, emotional and neurological damage typical in people who fail to cope.

Akiko's simple story of survival is not as captivating as blind mountaineering or finding a treasure chest, but most of the things that genuinely improve people's lives are quite mundane. I built an international program of research that at one point included a five-country, six-year study with colleagues from New Zealand, South Africa, Colombia and China who replicated the work of my team in Canada. Together, we examined how 13-to-24-year-olds with complex needs living in stressed environments (such as economically depressed neighbourhoods and homes with family violence) make use of the health and social services available to them, and whether their patterns of service use are associated with their resilience over time. The point of the study was to explore a seldom discussed aspect of resilience: the services we receive from health, social welfare and educational systems, as well as the informal supports we sometimes need from our families and communities. Rather than focusing our attention on individual factors such as grit or mindset, we wanted to understand whether an investment in services could be a better way to nurture well-being in sub-optimal environments. Remarkably few studies to date have

asked the obvious question: Does resilience depend on the services we receive?

ILLUSTRATION BY XULIN WANG

For our sample, we purposefully selected adolescents and young adults who were using multiple services. These were young people needing special educational supports at the same time that they were under the supervision of a child-welfare worker because of exposure to family violence. Or they were youth with severe mental-health problems such as attention-deficit disorder and conduct disorder who were also under a probation order because they had been caught selling drugs or committing a violent act. Some of our participants had learning challenges, others anxiety disorders. Some were homeless because they had run away from abusive parents. When data collection was completed, we methodically churned out statistics.

Finally, on a warm spring day after years of work, a senior statistician on the team came to

me with a one-page graphic representation of a structural equation model that focused on Canadian youth. The math was daunting, but what it showed was the relationship between risk exposure, resilience and behavioural outcomes for almost 500 young people, all of them facing serious challenges. We later verified these results with more than 7,000 young people around the world, but this was the first proof that let us say with certainty that resilience depends more on what we receive than what we have within us. These resources, more than individual talent or positive attitude, accounted for the difference between youths who did well and those who slid into drug addiction, truancy and high-risk sexual activity.

I have to admit it, the diagram made me tear up. We had proved that resourced individuals do far better than individuals without resources, no matter how rugged the latter might be. We also discovered that the reason many young people who need help do not take advantage of what is offered is because service providers seldom tailor their programs to the clients' needs. For example, we heard stories of school guidance counsellors who insisted that parents take time off from minimum-wage jobs to attend case conferences because guidance counsellors and psychometricians do not work evenings. It should come as no surprise that the most vulnerable families did not show up because they could not afford the lost time at work. It was their children, doubly disadvantaged by learning difficulties and poverty, who wound up untreated and who eventually dropped out of school.

There were many more findings of that nature. We learned that if kids were not responding to treatment, it was not the kids' fault but a failure of the services to meet their needs. Shape the right environment for a troubled child, and the child changes for the better. Put in front of a child the necessary help, and he or she will take advantage of it. This is true even with children who are not initially motivated to make something of their lives.

A positive attitude, encouraged by those around us, helps us heal and cope with the continuing stress of adjustment. But it has also been found that the single biggest predictor of adjustment after a crisis has nothing to do with prayer, relationships or a positive attitude. Sometimes recovery depends on much more mundane things – such as how quickly insurance adjusters settle claims after a natural disaster.

Colleagues of mine who work as social workers discovered that after major flooding

destroyed towns at the base of the Rocky Mountains, people who had their claims settled within a year recovered quicker and showed far less stress than those who had to live in hotels and cope with being away from their community for longer periods of time. As a resilience-promoting factor, a quick claims settlement means people can start rebuilding their homes. It gives them purpose and focus. It rejoins them with their communities and gives their children the chance to return to their schools. It also decreases the daily stress of living and the worry associated with an uncertain financial future.

The banks and insurance companies must have taken note. When wildfires destroyed Fort McMurray, Alta., in the summer of 2016, residents were scattered across nearby towns and cities and packed into community centres. Financial institutions loaded their staff onto large buses, the kind that touring rock bands use, and on each bus were bank machines, loans officers and insurance adjusters. The bankers travelled to the shelters, sleeping on the buses so they would not burden the scarce local resources. By travelling to people who had been forcibly displaced, the bankers were able to give their customers access to cash and an opportunity to start the paperwork required to submit a claim for compensation. The effort must have expedited payouts, because people were back in Fort McMurray and rebuilding within months. Not everyone was fortunate enough to have his insurance paid out quickly, but for those who had a friendly banker and an insurance adjuster make a visit, emotional outcomes were likely better than expected.

In a major disaster, the first responders should be the fire department and paramedics. Second should be insurance adjusters and bankers. A distant third should be psychologists, and only if financial claims cannot be settled quickly. Mental-health professionals, such as me, are sometimes needed – just not as much as we think.

None of this is entirely new. We have known for at least half a century that certain things about our communities make them likely to prevent mental illness. Socially integrated communities are better for us: They have fewer single-parent households, stronger relationships between neighbours, good leaders, recreational facilities and spaces, less hostility, fewer disasters, lower levels of poverty and a shared culture. Healthy communities do not depend on the internal messages people tell themselves, or even on the number of psychotherapists and yoga teachers. These communities are largely a consequence of good governance and progressive taxation, housing and social-welfare policies.

We know that those closest to us within our environments – our families, friends, and colleagues at work – have an enormous effect on our collective capacity to thrive. Improve the functioning of the family, peer group or work team, and individuals are more likely to show resilience, even if their larger world is seeming to become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

That is just as true in the workplace, where no amount of personal development is going to help you succeed if your employer offers no support. As long as mountains of memos and paperwork accumulate, unrealistic deadlines are imposed, projects are understaffed, jobs are insecure, facilities are poorly maintained and administrators are incompetent, workers will burn out and fail, whatever their individual beliefs or behaviours. Every serious look at workplace stress has found that when we try to influence workers' problems in isolation, little change happens.

In all aspects of life, social justice is important to resilience, too. Decades of research have shown that people who are treated justly do better physically and mentally than those who are not, and we also know that people who are in better health tend to be more productive and happier.

The science of resilience is clear: The social, political and natural environments in which we live are far more important to our health, fitness, finances and time management than our individual thoughts, feelings or behaviours. When it comes to maintaining well-being and finding success, environments matter. In fact, they may matter just as much, and likely much more, than individual thoughts, feelings or behaviours. A positive attitude may be required to take advantage of opportunities as you find them, but no amount of positive thinking on its own is going to help you survive a natural disaster, a bad workplace or childhood abuse. Change your world first by finding the relationships that nurture you, the opportunities to use your talents and the places where you experience community and governmental support and social justice. Once you have these, your world will help you succeed more than you could ever help yourself.

# More From The Globe and Mail

EXPLAINER

Fifty two per cent of Canadians likely to buy an electric vehicle in the next five years, says Toyota survey

Don’t rely on retirement to make you happy

ROB CARRICK

OPINION

B.C.'s Sunshine Coast is abundant in cozy eateries

ALEXANDRA GILL

China’s ambassador says it’s up to Canada to unfreeze diplomatic relations

Is it arrogant to see yourself as a big motivator?

HARVEY SCHACHTER

‘Zero proof’ trend raises its glass to good health



351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher