

Christina Berndt

## **Resilience**

The secret of harnessing your  
inner resources

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## **Christina Berndt: Resilienz**

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### **What characterizes a resilient person in everyday life?**

Nobody would have prophesied little William a great future. Even though he was born in a small village in Arkansas named Hope, there was little hope to be found in his young life. One day, when William was trying to protect his mother from his violent stepfather, the man shot at them. He was so drunk that he missed, but he left the bullet

holes in the wall as a reminder. Nevertheless, William – whom everybody called Billy – took his stepfather's last name when he was 14. He was to become world famous under the name of Bill Clinton.

Another child with another constitution might have perished under these domestic circumstances. But William even went on to become president of the United States of America. How did he bear up against his stepfather's tyranny and scorn? Which factors of his otherwise horrible youth made him strong?

One is easily inclined to see the reason for little William's great resilience solely in his personality. In fact, seemingly unbreakable people such as Bill Clinton often combine a considerable number of qualities that lend them strength. Everybody who gets back on track after a bad blow of fate has to have a great ability to endure and cope with frustration. More protection against decline comes from intelligence and the ability to connect to others, because these skills make it easier for resilient people to find a way out of a crisis and to build up a support network for difficult times. It also helps not to cling to habits and to be open to changes in life, maybe even take pleasure from them. Last but not least, after a blow of fate, optimism and a sense of humour help to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But resilience is not merely an ability, a certain feature or the sum of character traits. Apart from these personality factors, our environment plays a significant role in the development of mental stamina.

No matter how strong the personality, it cannot survive in a completely adverse environment, and people with basically weak personalities can be strengthened by their environment in such a way that they eventually become more accomplished at coping with crises than a tough person.

### **Resilience rests on several mainstays**

The children's chances for a wonderful and fulfilling life were less than realistic. In the 1950s, the native people of the Hawaiian island of Kauai were suffering from the same misery as many other indigenous people under outside rule. The landscape may have been paradise, but for many children life was hell. Alcoholism and poverty were the par for the course on the island. This sad life was already continuing into the second generation – the children of the poor workers on the sugarcane plantations were often neglected or even abused, their parents' marriages were frequently broken and money was always too tight. Nobody would have believed these boys and girls had much chance in life.

But in the end came a surprise. For forty years, the American developmental psychologist Emmy Werner and

her team from the University of California had been interviewing and observing exactly 698 boys and girls from Kauai. All the children had been born in 1955. 201 of them grew up under extremely adverse circumstances on the already problematic little island. From earliest childhood onwards, these 201 were exposed to traumatic experiences, their parents were mentally ill or alcoholics or they lived with constant discontent in their families. Werner was especially taken with these children.

She took an interest in people only very few scientists had paid attention to before: less the two thirds of the children who unsurprisingly barely got out of the problematic circumstances they had been born into. These 129 young people fulfilled all the negative expectations their environment had of them: at the age of 10, they already had learning and behavioural deficits and before they turned 18, they had either got into trouble with the law or developed mental illnesses themselves.

The young psychologist studied the surprising third of these especially burdened children: 72 young Hawaiians actually mastered their difficult situation and managed to lead a good life in spite of their negative social prognosis. These children never showed any behavioural problems at any point in time. They were good at school, integrated in the social life of their island and set themselves realistic goals. At the age of 40, none of them was unemployed, had a criminal record or was dependent on social services. That means every third of these especially neglected children from Kauai developed into a self-confident, caring and efficient adult, who was successful in their job and their relationships.

Thus Emmy Werner unhinged the previously established thesis that children with such a background had barely a chance to escape a terrible fate. She scientifically confirmed for the first time that even if the starting conditions were as bad as possible, some people were able to master their lives.

Emmy Werner wanted to know which factors protect people from the adversities in life. What exactly, she wondered, saved some of the children from Kauai from mental health problems and descending into neglect? This is a key question, not only for medicine and psychology, as remedial teacher Michael Fingerle points out, but also for pedagogics. "For a long time we were only worrying why some people do not come to terms with life," he says. "But for every educational basis it is fundamental to know how to successfully lead a good life." To work this out, however, researchers first had to determine what a good life actually was. In spite of her ground-breaking work, with respect to this question Emmy Werner was a product of her time. Her study, which began in 1958, defined a good life primarily by means of external criteria and easy-to-measure successes.

She monitored the educational level of the children of Kauai and their vocational training. She took note whether they got into conflict with the law and whether their marriages lasted longer than a few years. Finally, she also determined whether the young people developed any mental illnesses.

Fingerle criticizes that this is a very conservative, standardized view of people's lives. "To all intents and purposes, science ought to be non-judgemental," he says. It would be more important to ask the persons concerned whether they were content with themselves. Because life is about more than a steady job and a marriage with two children, he says. It's about a person knowing, in spite of the worst of crises, how to create a meaningful life for themselves and, in the end, being happy with themselves and their existence.

## **Relationships are the key for strength**

Notwithstanding some criticism, Michael Fingerle regards Emmy Werner's ground-breaking work very highly. "The Kauai study illustrates the main factors which keep people healthy in spite of the most adverse circumstances." The psychologist Friedrich Lösel concurs with this. Lösel is also a criminologist and is therefore very interested in finding out the likelihood of children from difficult social backgrounds spending their lives differently and not periodically in jail like their parental role models. "The greatest protection in life is relationships and commitments," Lösel concludes. The strong children from Kauai all had something that the other children, who ended up in alcoholism like their parents, did not. They had at least one person closely attached to them, who was affectionate and sensitive to their needs, who set limits and offered orientation.

Bill Clinton had such a person close to him. Until his mother married his terrible stepfather, he grew up with his loving grandparents. Yet he knew even then that he didn't have to depend solely on his grandparents. Despite her weaknesses, his mother was also a person of trust for him, who tried her best to be there for him. Together, they found ways to avoid his stepfather's tyranny. "Just one such close relationship can give so much strength that it cancels out a lot of negative factors all by itself," says remedial teacher Monika Schumann and emphasizes, "That's a great chance for us teachers."

A chance, because the person of trust does not have to be mother or father, grandmother or grandfather. An aunt, a teacher or a neighbour can fulfil this role as well. "It's important to be on eye level with children," Schumann says. "Somebody has to offer them a feeling of security, acknowledge their progress, stimulate their skills and love them independently of their achievements and good conduct; these things strengthen children for life."

So it's no coincidence that on Kauai the first-born children and those with relatively few siblings showed positive development. The children who were at least two years old before they had to share their parent's attention with siblings did best.

Love is a gift. But even children don't always receive it entirely without their own effort. Basically, resilience is the ability to enter beneficial relationships and acquire assistance from people or institutions, says the Zurich-based psychologist and relationship therapist Ulrike Borst. Some people don't have to put much work into this: when you are born a little sunshine and take people's hearts by storm, you attract attention without any further effort. "Children with a friendly, alert and open disposition make it easier for people in their immediate vicinity to like them," says sociologist and resilience expert Karena Leppert. "That's why they have it easier finding friends or other supporters." This is obvious with the Kauai children: those infants who were generally dubbed "low-maintenance" and who didn't plague their significant others with gruelling eating habits or exhausting sleeping patterns got more positive attention from their parents or other close acquaintances than the more difficult infants. At the age of one, those children who were later classified as successful and resilient were already described by their mothers as active, loving, sociable and friendly.

When the children turned two, independent observers subscribed to that view and described the children as pleasant, happy, friendly, open and companionable. The resilient children were also more integrated into social interaction with their peers. They readily helped others in need – and were able to ask for help, if necessary.

It's an interplay between the children's temperament and the responsiveness of their person of trust, Karena Leppert explains. The children's friendly nature entails their greater strength in life – because it ensures the amenability of other people. At the same time it has a positive effect on parents and friends when a person is robust, energetic and has an active, socially engaging nature. Relationships give strength – and strength causes relationships. It's a win-win situation.

As a result, people who have strong mental resilience usually feel very safe and secure in their environment. They integrate well in groups – like the young Norwegian Social Democrat Vegard Grøslie Wennesland, who overcame the horror of Utøya fairly well – they are agreeable, dedicated, enthusiastic and diligent. They are rather extroverted and look forward to gaining new experiences as well as meeting new people. And in a crisis situation, they have a reliable environment where they find support and advice for solving problems positively.

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## **What makes us strong, what makes us weak**

The factors that actually distinguish a mentally strong person have been researched extensively by scientists in various studies, and they've discovered more and more special features in the characters of resilient people. We now have whole lists of attributes that are exceptionally strong or weak in mentally strong individuals. These attributes have been described by scientists worldwide again and again – regardless of their ethnic context or geographical conditions. The list shows which factors help to come out of a crisis as unscathed as possible (adapted from Friedrich Lösel):

(+) = enhances mental resilience

(-) = lowers mental resilience

### PERSONALITY

+ humour

+ flexibility

+ emotional balance

+ tolerance of frustration

+ assertiveness

+ stamina

+ power

+ optimism

+ interest in leisure activities

- impulsiveness

## COGNITIVE COMPETENCE

+ good school results

+ special talents

+ realistic planning/future prospects

+ motivation for achievement

+ intelligence

## SELF-AWARENESS

+ self-efficacy

+ self-confidence

- helplessness

## COPING

+ active problem-solving

+ ability to dissociate

- passive-aggressive reaction to problems

## SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

+ attachment figure outside the nuclear family

+ good relationships with educators

+ supportive siblings

+ good relationship to school

+ experience of meaning and structure in life

+ religiousness/spirituality

+ satisfaction with support received

+ positive social behaviour



+ high language skills

#### EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE

+ warm, accepting

+ controlled, norm-oriented

+ adjusted requirements and responsibility

#### **The error of everlasting happiness: resilience and health**

It was bad, but he knew he would cope. Police officers like Dick are survivors, otherwise they wouldn't take up the job in the first place. But September 11, 2001 drove even Dick to the brink of his endurance. Like many other of his colleagues, the 36-year-old was one of the first people to arrive at the horrific site of the World Trade Center in New York after the terrorist attack. They witnessed people jumping from the burning, crashing towers. In the chaos, they looked for survivors and helped those they found. But mostly, all they discovered was dead bodies under the ruins. Everywhere Dick saw body parts lying around. He heard the mad voices of the survivors, saw their horrified or completely empty faces. Women covered in white dust, men who couldn't stop crying, children screaming like he'd never heard before. And he knew that under the debris, he would find more dead and more body parts – but he kept on digging.

After 9/11 Dick needed a psychiatrist. It was because of the sadness he simply couldn't shake off during the first couple of days. He woke up in the morning and the first thing he felt was that deep sadness. He didn't even know exactly where it came from. It wasn't the terrible fate of the people he'd seen, it wasn't the faces contorted with pain, the stories about the widows and orphans in the media every day, whose fate he had been unable to avert in spite of his brave and selfless efforts. It was a deep sadness that welled up inside him. His psychiatrist told him that it was a consequence of the terrible situation Dick had experienced. But his doctor also reasoned that, as terrible as it was for his patient, Dick would survive. In spite of the mental trauma, the man appeared self-confident and basically at ease with himself. Those were good prospects.

Ten years later, Dick actually resembles his earlier self from before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Perhaps he's become slightly more sensitive, maybe he's gained a different view of life. Some incidents he experiences now in his job as a police officer remind him of 9/11 and the days after. But they no longer trigger the anxiety and sadness that these memories did in the first couple of years after the event.

"I knew that everything would eventually pass," Dick later says self-confidently. He had never expected that anything would ever grab his soul in such a way that he would ever have to consult a psychiatrist, least of all because of things that happened to him in his job. But even though he was affected for a short time, Dick is a good example of a resilient personality, a fighter who gets to his feet after a blow and rolls up his sleeves instead of slumping down.

"Resilience does not mean that you are constantly happy," Jens Asendorpf points out. Strong souls are vulnerable as well. Depending on the situation, some are deeply affected by what they have experienced, while others quarrel with their fate. The resistant ones, however, do not get stuck in frustration, sorrow or

terror; they pick themselves up and are less prone to chronic illness. Resilient people do not get broken by harsh blows of fate – after a while they see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Earlier scientists had a different view. They thought that resilient people were completely invulnerable. This picture of invulnerability was first painted by one of the earliest researchers in the sector of resilience, the American psychologist Norman Garmezy. He was so elated about his discovery of the strong people that he may well have aggrandized them too much. Other scientists followed suit.

“At first, we also acted on the assumption that resilient people were invulnerable,” psychologist Friedrich Lösel tells. “That’s why we called our study of teenagers from adverse backgrounds the Bielefeld Invulnerability Study.” Today, Lösel prefers to talk about the Bielefeld Resilience Study.

The reason behind this was increasing criticism in professional circles of the ideal of the invulnerable individual. Clinical psychologist Froma Walsh from Chicago complained as early as 1998 that the concept of invulnerability was based on the idealistic image of a male “Teflon ego” and the American ethos of superman. Also, in the long run, this image couldn’t be reconciled with research findings. Studies showed more and more that resilient people, too, had spells of doubt and despair. “No human being is invulnerable or immune against fate,” the late Swiss psychotherapist Rosmarie Welter-Enderlin pointed out. “Resilience is conceived as people’s ability to master crises in their life cycles with the help of personally and socially acquired resources and to use them as an occasion for personal development.”

Being resilient doesn’t mean reverting to one’s former state without scars or changes, Froma Walsh adds. It means successfully tackling adverse situations, fighting through them, learning from them and, moreover, integrating these experiences into the web of one’s life. A resilient person is vulnerable, but the wounds heal comparatively quickly and do not scar too much. Invulnerable? “No, they are not,” even Emmy Werner says now about the resilient children from Kauai. “They are vulnerable, but invincible.”

Health psychologist Ralf Schwarzer says, “Basically, we should talk about mental elasticity instead of mental robustness.” There are times when it hurts; there are times when you can be down. But in the end, you always have the strength for something new.

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## **How to train character strengths**

“Build what’s strong, don’t fix what’s wrong!” – that’s Martin Seligman’s motto. And it seems to work, according to a study that Seligman carried out with 577 test subjects. The psychologists asked the participants to note down what was good about their day every evening for a week – rather like part of the US Army’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme. A control group was simply told to write about their experiences at the end of the day, not mentioning any focus on the positive. In actual fact, those who went over the good stuff every evening still had a more optimistic basic outlook and fewer symptoms of depression even six months after the programme ended.

A second strategy proved just as effective: the test subjects used an online questionnaire to recognize their



character strengths, finding out their five most prominent positive personality factors. They were then asked to use these strengths every day for a week, in a way that was new to them. For instance, a person with marked generosity might put a new parking ticket behind the windscreen wipers of a car with an expired ticket, so that the driver didn't have to pay a fine. And someone particularly creative might answer their partner's question about what's for dinner by miming the meal. People good at forgiving might let themselves get away with a mistake for once. And a test subject with a lot of joie de vivre might express it through a really crazy outfit or spend a few minutes bouncing on a bed like a child.

Willibald Ruch is another expert who trains strengths, in his Zurich Strengths Programme. A professor of personality psychology, he modelled his programme on Seligman's work and also tested it in studies. Ruch's homepage offers various tests to find out one's personal strengths ([www.charakterstaerken.org](http://www.charakterstaerken.org)).

In his most important study on the subject to date, the test subjects practiced gratitude, for example, by writing a letter to someone who played a key role in their lives and thanking them. They could train their awareness of beauty by taking note of moments and situations in their everyday lives when they felt admiration for something beautiful. That might be people or objects, or even particular gestures or movements.

"Training character strengths makes people happy," is Ruch's conclusion. His studies also showed that the effect of a short training period can last up to six months. It makes a difference, however, which of their strengths a person trains. The greatest effect, says Ruch, comes from concentrating on curiosity, gratefulness, optimism, humour or enthusiasm.

### **The ten routes to resilience**

In the meantime, the American Psychological Association has even uploaded a ten-point plan on the basis of Seligman's programme to its website, called Road to Resilience ([http:// www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx)). Here are their ten routes to building resilience:

- 1. Make connections.** Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important. Accept help and support from those who care about you. Assist others in their time of need. Some people find that being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations, or other local groups provides social support.
- 2. Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.** You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.
- 3. Accept that change is a part of living.** Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accept circumstances that cannot be changed and focus on circumstances that you can alter.
- 4. Move toward your goals.** Develop some realistic goals instead of dreaming of things that are unachievable. Do something regularly — even if it seems like a small accomplishment — that enables you to move toward your goals.





- 5. Take decisive actions.** Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.
- 6. Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** Perhaps you'll find you have grown in some respect as a result of difficult situations. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality and heightened appreciation for life.
- 7. Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts.
- 8. Keep things in perspective.** Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.
- 9. Maintain a hopeful outlook.** An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.
- 10. Take care of yourself.** Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

Another thing that helps: **Discover your spiritual side.** Numerous studies have found that people cope with difficult phases in life better if they believe in a higher power. It doesn't matter if that's God, Allah, Jahwe, Buddha or the many Hindu deities, and nor do people have to feel part of any organized religion. For some, the belief that nature is a force watching over them helps; others find happiness in esoteric communities. And some people see a political idea as providing a meaning to their life. It's most likely the energy of the group and the conviction of belonging to a coherent whole on earth that helps us stand up to the blows life deals us.

There's no need to work through all ten points, of course, to get to the destination on the road to resilience. Resilience also means deciding for yourself what does you good. "Strength is always a combination of many different factors," says the health psychologist Ralf Schwarzer. The most important thing in his view is that people build themselves a social network and then maintain it. "That's one reason why it's better not to build too many conflicts into one's life," Schwarzer explains. He also recommends often trying out something new: "That strengthens self-effectiveness." It doesn't have to be something complicated every time. Learning to cook Chinese food would be one idea. Or even practicing over and over until you can park the car backwards.

English Translation by Katy Derbyshire