

How to develop resilience in young people

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Build a resilient athlete and you build a resilient human being, well-equipped to deal with all the pressures modern life brings.

‘Resilience’ has become a powerful trigger word in the media and a real buzzword in the coaching community too.

When prefixed with the words ‘lack of’, the term can elicit an emotionally-charged reaction, having become synonymous with the derogatory expression ‘snowflake generation’.

Deployed regularly to describe post-Millennials, this stereotype polarises opinion.

On the one hand, labelling all young adults as being incapable of dealing with conflict or criticism, likely to crumble at the first sign of pressure and who struggle to cope with failure grossly oversimplifies a [complex issue](#).

On the other, it would be wrong to turn a blind eye to the fact that young people today feel as if they are under an overwhelming and increasing amount of pressure. Fuelled by their engagement with social media, emotional insecurities and anxieties have been driven sky high, while self-esteem, self-confidence and powers of resilience have, for a growing number, plunged to dangerous lows.

Sports coaches have a significant role to play in helping young people become better equipped at dealing

with the pressures that everyday life, as well as competitive sport will inevitably throw at them.

With the help of ConnectedCoaches Content Champion [Catherine Baker](#) – who, in her role as founder and managing director of Sport and Beyond, delivers seminars on building resilience – we will explore the cultural context behind the need to develop resilience in young people, demonstrate unequivocally that resilience can be learnt and offer strategies and ideas to help sports coaches instil resilience in their participants.

The good news is that playing sport represents the perfect learning environment. Why? Because it provides so many opportunities to practice.

‘Learning to be resilient is so necessary at the present time, and sport is such a good fit,’ says Catherine. ‘One of the problems with resilience is, if nothing ever goes wrong, if you don’t ever have any setbacks, how can you demonstrate that you can be resilient and how can you build your ability to be resilient?’

‘With sport, there are setbacks all the time. Because wherever and whoever you are playing, there can only be one winner. It is a brilliant platform therefore to build your resilience.’

What is resilience?

Discussions around resilience are populated by words and phrases like perseverance; overcoming setbacks; grit; steely character; strong mindset; indomitable spirit; ability to withstand pressure; mental fortitude; determination; and coping strategies.

The simple dictionary definition of resilience is the ‘capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.’

Resilience is affected by biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that interact with each other to form specific personality traits, determining how we respond to stressful situations. It is the mind’s defence mechanism against adversity.

In many ways, sport imitates life, with athletes and competitors constructing their own unique set of psychological coping strategies over time that they can call upon in their hour of need. The more we grapple with sporting challenges, the hope is the stronger we will be mentally the next time a similar scenario occurs.

Unfortunately, there is growing evidence to suggest that resilience levels are flagging in children, adolescents and young adults.

As touched on above, the side-effect of smart phone overuse and an addiction to social networking sites like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat is an overriding sense of pressure. This is driving [feelings of inadequacy](#) and emotional instability, which leads to eroding levels of resilience and ultimately a miscellany of mental health problems.

These modern-day habits evolve into endless cycles of rumination, which fuel a maelstrom of negative emotions that slowly, systematically and invisibly chip away at people’s self-confidence and self-esteem, their ability to bounce back from perceived failure and their willingness to take risks.

That’s one viewpoint. But of course, it is important to remember the coaching mantra that everybody is different.

As Catherine explains: ‘There is an argument that social media can make some people **more** resilient. Young people are dealing with posts and pictures being liked and not liked every single day so they are having the opportunity to build their resilience on a daily basis much more than our generation did.’

All of us resemble the Loch Ness Monster

The point of this article is not to argue that all young adults today are emotionally brittle and melt whenever the heat is turned up, but rather to give some background and context as to why resilience matters before expanding on the power of coaches to make a meaningful and universal difference.

Coaches can serve as both a reactive and a proactive force, helping those whose resilience levels urgently need cranking up a few notches while further strengthening the mindset of those who already have a natural propensity for dealing with stressful situations.

It is imperative before learning the strategies that coaches understand not just what resilience is but why it is such a key quality in the make-up of exceptional athletes.

By way of analogy, if you were to plot any player or athlete's career progression on a graph, the black line will invariably look like the outline of the Loch Ness Monster – picture a looping body and neck as doodled by a six-year-old child.

There will be peaks and troughs as sure as night follows day. Nobody's sporting journey follows a linear path.

The key is how you cope during the troughs. That can be the differentiating factor between those who make it and those who nearly make it.

As Nick Levett explained to me in the ConnectedCoaches blog [‘Exploring the key psychological aspects that underpin performance success’](#):

‘Having resilience is vital because sporting setbacks on the way to becoming a high performing athlete are guaranteed. Real life too will throw a whole host of problems in your direction. It is a person's approach to overcoming those setbacks, and the ability to look forward, that is really important.

‘I want every child to have resilience to deal with setbacks because life is going to be tough at times. Whether it is losing a grandparent, parents splitting up, or whatever it might be, they are going to need some of those skills. And if we can use sport to foster some of these behaviour outcomes then this is absolutely relevant for grass-roots coaches as much as it is for coaches on a talent pathway.’

No athlete is going to escape being dropped, will win every race, score in every game, delight every judge with their routine or go through each season unscathed. At some point you will fall short of expectations and fall foul of injury. That's life.

‘So, how do you deal with the troughs? First of all, by having the right attitude and approach to your effort, your mistakes, your challenges, your feedback. In other words, developing a [growth mindset](#),’ says Catherine.

‘Another very powerful way to build resilience within teams within organisations is around how to manage expectations – not just expectations of athletes but parents too.

‘A coach must make it really clear that you are going to have those troughs but actually that those are really important to get you to a better outcome. It's not going to be a straight line going upwards because we are going to try things, and we are going to get things wrong, but we will be better for it in the long-term.

‘There is a lot of talk in sport at the moment about putting yourself into the [uncomfortable zone](#), or discomfort area. There is a link between resilience and challenging yourself outside of your comfort zone

– which again comes down to growth mindset and learning to embrace challenges, be intrigued not put off by mistakes and feedback and to enjoy effort.’

Perception and conceptualisation

One of the central elements of resilience is perception, which is explored in this [excellent article in the New Yorker](#).

Columbia University psychology professor George Bonanno, who has been studying resilience for nearly three decades, says: ‘Do you conceptualise an event as traumatic, or as an opportunity to learn and grow? We can make ourselves more or less vulnerable by how we think about things.’

In other words, it is about how you perceive a situation and how you manage your expectations around it that enables you to be resilient.

‘So, for example, a coach might explain, “We are going to be trying this in the match today. We might lose 10-0 but I don’t care about that. What I care about is are you trying to put this new technique, skill or tactic into practice?” says Catherine.

Mental agility is a key component of resilience and coaches have a plethora of tools and techniques at their disposal to help players become practised at regulating their emotions, so it becomes the brain’s default setting.

However, emotions can be tricky to fathom at the best of times and, rather than expect young people to consciously navigate the precise steps that their brain is going through, it is the coach’s role to act as a facilitator of learning.

Catherine explains: ‘The thing to remember about your emotional brain is that it reacts more quickly to events than our rational brain.

‘So as a really easy example, let’s say you are coaching hockey to a group of under-tens. You ask them to do something and one child says they find it really hard. Everyone around them doesn’t seem to be struggling and is doing it quite well. Their emotional brain will react first, and they will probably be quite upset, quite disappointed, quite jealous, quite insecure they can’t do it and everyone else can.

‘What you are trying to do is to give them tools and techniques to let their rational brain catch up, so they are able to reframe their negative thoughts as more positive ones. That’s where really simple ideas around the use of language can help. So, not saying “I can’t do it” but “I can’t do it yet”. Or instead of, “I’ve tried this, I can’t do it”, “I’ve tried this, that didn’t work, therefore I’m going to try something different”.

‘So yes, acknowledge they are going to feel disappointment, but then because you have reinforced that you weren’t expecting them to get it right first time (managed their expectations) and employed some simple language techniques, they are able to manage their emotions and tap into their rational brain.’

Another player might trudge off at the final whistle feeling very low after underperforming. Help them conceptualise the experience differently by challenging them to answer three questions: **What worked well? What could I have done better? What am I going to do differently next time?** This will help them learn from the experience rather than wallow in it.

‘The use of that as a formula can help people build resilience because you are framing it in such a different way,’ says Catherine.

More formulas for success

To create an effective facilitative environment, it is vital the coach provides the right balance of **high expectations and assurance with a high level of support and direction**.

‘So, imagine you are in my hockey session. I might say: “Blake I have really high expectations of you and I know you are going to be a great addition to the team”. Well, that’s only going to get you so far. It might make you feel good temporarily but if I’m not giving you anything to help you get better then there are going to be problems.’

When you then hit the inevitable trough, the ramifications could include criticism from team-mates, a fall in self-confidence and, ultimately, an avoidance mentality due to experiencing the consequences of underperformance.

If a coach can add outstanding ongoing support and direction, then they have a powerful framework for helping boost their participants’ performance levels and confidence during these low points.

The support and direction can take many forms, including providing constructive feedback; helping athletes focus on the achievable not the unachievable; promoting sensible risk-taking; being encouraged to view failure as an opportunity for learning; a focus on promoting autonomous learning to cultivate responsibility, problem-solving and taking ownership of goals.

Every coach should want to develop players and athletes who have the courage to fail, learn to capitalise on their mistakes and who fly rather than flee in the face of adversity. Because, as discussed, building psychological skills in young people can [positively impact on their lives outside of sport](#) as well as enrich their sporting experience, with far-reaching implications for the health and wellbeing of our society.

‘I definitely agree with that,’ says Catherine, ‘and this view is also backed up by evidence. The Dame Kelly Holmes Trust commissioned some [research](#) at the University of Stirling in 2016 that looked at what it was about elite athletes’ mindsets that drives their success.

‘The Trust’s athlete mentors work on [young people programmes](#) helping disadvantaged young people transform their lives. The Trust was interested in finding out what it was their athlete mentors had, what was it that drove not just their success in elite sport, but also their ability to develop them in the young people they work with to give them a better chance in life after leaving competitive sport.

‘One of the five attributes they discovered, what they called, “#MoreThanMedals Attitudes”, was resilience.’

The Trust’s mentors are putting the research to good use by embedding the findings into their practice, transforming the lives of a growing number of young people by helping them become more resilient.

Marginal gains approach

Here is a familiar question: How can coaches instil such an important quality in their participants if they only see them for one or two hours a week?

The answer is to keep chipping away a little every week and eventually you will shape their behaviours, thoughts and actions so they become models of resilience.

‘I think it comes down to consistency of a very clear message,’ is Catherine’s response. ‘What do I mean by that? To bring it down to its absolute basics, I’m talking about cultivating a growth mindset and framing it so that athletes believe in their capacity to personally challenge themselves and learn and develop their abilities through practice, dedication and hard work.

'If a coach has that as a consistent approach which they frame very clearly across every single session which they run, that is going to help embed resilience.'

You may only be one person, but remember you are one of more than three million active coaches in the UK. With this marginal gains approach to building resilience, the coaching industry can collectively wield tremendous power to shape lives and influence society.

So to summarise, informed coaches are able to arm their participants with the tools to graduate from both sport's School of Hard Knocks and the University of Life, giving them the strength to break down any barriers that lie in their path and the powers of recovery to bounce back off the ropes when pressure comes knocking.

Please share your tips on building resilience below, along with any other thoughts or suggestions.

Further reading:

Read Nick Ruddock's take on resilience in his blog ['Critics'](#): 'Limiting beliefs, insecurities and fears paralyse people to move forwards. Successful people find ways to manage their emotions and remove limiting beliefs from taking charge of their destiny. They optimise their mental state to aid performance... our athletes need to know that where focus goes, energy flows.'

tags : confidence, mindset, pressure, psychological, mental-health, stress, resilience, anxiety, criticism, adversity, social-media