

## Can Resilience Be Developed at Work? A Meta-Analytic Review of Resilience-Building Programme Effectiveness

To prevent absenteeism, counterproductive work behaviour, and other stress-related issues, organizations seek to adopt resilience-building programmes and develop positive psychological health as a means of primary prevention. However, the effectiveness of these programmes remains unclear, as research is limited. In the current article, researchers used 42 independent samples across 37 studies and summarized the



effectiveness of resilience-building programmes implemented in organizational contexts. For distress line call-takers, knowledge of resiliency can be a supportive factor in exchanges with callers at-risk for trauma or stress.

Resilience is the process of healthy functioning in the face of adversity, and resilience-building programmes to equip individuals with resources and skills to prevent the potentially negative effects of future exposure to stressors. Building resilience in the workplace promotes positive psychological functioning and well-being, as opposed to simply treating problems.

This, and the overall financial costs that organizations experience due to increased employee stress and sometimes trauma, makes resilience-building programs all the more attractive.

### Development of Resilience Theory

The study of resilience has held a prominent place in the child development literature for decades. In comparison, resilience research has only recently gained momentum in the occupational literature.

Resilience among adults often involves overcoming acute and/or traumatic stress, brought upon by catastrophic events or major loss. For individuals working in occupations associated with high risk for trauma – firefighters, police officers, military and disaster relief personnel - the importance of primary prevention through resilience-building is clear.

Resilience may also be relevant for stress in the workplace. Employees may suffer from burnout or reduced performance and health, which often affects turnover rates. The costs of stress are substantial to organizations, however, to address stress-related work problems, researchers have sought to develop training programmes to prevent stress from becoming a burden on organizational effectiveness and employee health.

### **Building Resilience Through the Development of Protective Factors**

Resilience is about the successful use protective factors - capabilities and resources we use to protect ourselves against the negative consequences associated with adverse experiences.

Resilience-building programmes typically focus on the psycho-social factors that aid in development, such as:

- self-efficacy;
- optimism;
- social resources; and
- cognitive appraisal/coping.

As well, proactive strategies (positive cognitive appraisal and reappraisal, and active and problem-focused coping), along with spiritual coping, have been demonstrated to contribute to primary prevention, even among individuals in high-risk occupations.

For the current study, researchers assessed the effects of four resilience-building programmes conducted in the workplace:

1. **Programme sample.** Existing theory suggests resilience is most relevant among populations at the greatest risk of experiencing stress or trauma. People with an elevated risk factor likely require a larger reservoir of resources to overcome demands.
2. **Occupational setting.** Resource-based models of stress have also considered the role of fit between available resources and the types of stress and adversity experienced, which suggests that certain protective factors may be more important than others in preventing the negative consequences associated with specific types of stress and adversity.

### 3. **Training Delivery Format: Direct Delivery**

- i) **Train-the-Trainer:** Leaders receive resilience training and share learned knowledge and skills with their teams.
- ii) **Classroom Settings:** Time and cost-effective and may serve to enhance individuals' social resources within the workplace.
- iii) **Computer-Based Format:** The most commonly implemented method of direct delivery, computer-based programs are relatively easy and cost-effective to provide and receive training on a large scale. This format improves psycho-social health, and practical utility. Online resources supplement and reduce the costs of face-to-face training.

### **Outcomes and Results**

Findings suggest that resilience-based protective factors can have preventive effects across a wide range of stressors and sources of adversity, and that certain protective factors are relevant to different types of stress and adversity.

Researchers found that risk and protective factors typically do not exist in isolation but rather in a cumulative fashion. Sometimes referred to as "cumulative risk" or "pile-up" effects, those at risk of significant stress from one source are more likely to experience stressors from multiple sources. Similarly, research has shown that the effects of stress from work or family domains can create or exacerbate stress and satisfaction in other domains. Protective factors can function in a similar fashion, and enhancing one or more protective factors can subsequently serve to strengthen others, creating upward spirals or providing cumulative protection.

At a basic level, resilience-building is generally more effective among individuals at risk of experiencing considerable stress and/or those identified as lacking the basic protective resources and skills. Conducting a needs assessment prior to implementation will determine whether resilience-building is necessary and if it is maximizing the organization's return on investment.

Of the training programmes designed to prevent stress in the workplace, the array of one-on-one methods proved most effective, followed by classroom delivery format; train-the-trainer, and finally, computer-based delivery formats. Though computer-based training did not come through with strong numbers in this study, the authors stress that resilience-building via computer-based formats may have greater potential than is reflected through the current results.

As with many preventive programmes, the adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" contextualizes the potential impact that even small increases in psychological resilience can have on health and performance outcomes. Organizations would do well weighing in on these programmes.

*By Adam J. Vanhove, Mitchel N. Herian, Alycia L. U. Perez, Peter D. Harms, and Paul B. Lester*

*Edited by Leah Morrigan*

*Originally published in Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology (2016), 89, 278–307*