

Bouncebackability

RNIB Campaigns Officer Philip Connolly explains why he believes the concept of resilience is becoming as important to people with sight loss as it is to the economy as a whole

The word 'bouncebackability' was famously coined by Iain Dowie, the football manager, to describe the ability to come back from a losing position and win. Many people, and not just football fans, now use the word when talking about recovering from an overwhelming event to be stronger or better in some way. What they are really describing is resilience.

Study of the natural world teaches us more about resilience. One type is the time taken for a system to return to equilibrium – stability – following a disturbance. Another is the amount of disturbance that a system can absorb before changing to another stable regime. Such systems could at the present time include local societies, high street retailers, the Eurozone economies or even the human psyche. All of these could find it instructive to look to the lessons on resilience provided by nature. Of course, those who study nature know its importance already. Asked recently what gave him hope for the future, David Attenborough said that it was the indomitable spirit of humans and the resilience of nature.

In looking to nature it is not even necessary to look far. Our own bodies teach us a lot about resilience. Based on size alone we could be expected to live a mere 25 years, but mechanisms such as the skin's ability to regulate body temperature can potentially enable us to live more than three times longer. Technology is further adding to human longevity: it can enhance adaptation and thus improve resilience. Gene therapy – currently being used to prevent the onset of

choroideraemia (as reported in last month's NB) – is just the latest instance.

Just as there are two types, there also two main definitions of resilience. The first is "the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes its structure by changing the variables and processes that control behaviour". The ever-tightening squeeze on benefits to those living in low income households might be one such disturbance. The second definition is "the capacity of a system to experience shocks while retaining the same structure, function, feedback and therefore identity". Step forward the NHS.



Coping strategies

So why is 'resilience' becoming as important to social objectives as 'sustainability' is to environmental ones? Firstly, high impact events previously considered of low risk are now becoming the norm. Think of banks going bust. Next, these events combine to make other supposedly unlikely events more likely. Think countries going bust. In a globalised world, where economic and social systems are highly integrated, these events are happening with more frequency and with bigger consequences. When these events unfold, it is the poor (but not always the poor) who are most vulnerable to the consequences. Three in every four blind and partially sighted people are living in poverty already. Since the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the employment rate of blind and partially sighted people has fallen eight per cent.

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However, that's not to say that they are simply vulnerable. Most blind and partially sighted people, like most disabled people, were not born with their disability. Most have had to find a coping strategy, and in doing so have found new reserves of resourcefulness or inventiveness. Many have had to find new ways of doing things and prove to themselves and others that they are indeed resilient: often more so than those who have never been challenged to find these qualities in themselves. At a time when society and its structures have to adapt, organisations need adaptable people. In a period when people have to come to terms with loss – whether of income, jobs or relationships – civic society needs people versed in coping with loss.

So could blind and partially sighted people seek an enhanced role that utilises their experience of loss and adaptation? The answer remains unclear right now, but what is clear is that disabled people and their advocacy organisations need to develop new arguments, and indeed new offers, to show why the rest of society should care.

Creativity

Fortunately, there is ample evidence of the creativity of disabled people, and society is already dependent upon it: the telephone, the light bulb, the first electronic recording devices, mass-production were all the products of the minds of people with a disability. It's a dynamic that is still driving technology today, especially in healthcare.

If the strapline is going to be “resilient individuals contributing to resilient communities and developing resilient economies”, then it is necessary to first help people find their inner strength. The starting point should be a new respect for what people are capable of with support. Secondly, there is the need to take some short cuts. Fortunately, many of the answers to developing a resilient belief system are now available, thanks to extensive research by the educationalist Al Siebert.

In terms of resilient communities, the chief educator is Robert Putnam, the US sociologist and author of the seminal work on social capital, 'Bowling alone'. Social capital is the resource that flows from human relations: a resource that has a health and happiness dividend. Putnam notes, “For example, stroke victims who had strong support networks functioned better after the stroke and recovered more physical capacities than did stroke victims with thin social networks.” He goes on to conclude that a person who did →

→ not belong to any group but then joined one would cut their chances of dying in the next year by a half. He draws attention to psychologist Adam Seligman's view that we have over-emphasised personal control and autonomy at the expense of civic duty and common outcomes.

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Then there is the need to develop resilient economies as well – economies that not only integrate the millions, especially disabled people, who are currently excluded, but invite these very same people to shape the future of the labour market in their interests. Resilience requires worst case scenario planning and the active consideration of the unthinkable – what the philosopher Taleb calls a ‘black swan event’. One such recent event was the Japanese tsunami. The failure of the Fukushima nuclear reactor's safety features was due to the fact that the risk was perceived to be a lack of coolant – but the threat it actually faced was a lack of cooling caused by the disruption to the electricity supply. Many disabled people have already had a black swan event in their lives, so may not be so wedded to the notion that the future will automatically be more stable than the past, or even the present.

Resilience also cautions against over-optimisation, such as resource planning that maximises the efficient use of all the inputs in a process but lacks the flexibility to adjust when external circumstances change. Some local economies suffer this problem through an over-reliance on one major

employer, such as Corus on Teesside. Many household incomes are now so taut that domestic finances snap if the washing machine suddenly needs repairing. Resilience requires us to love the slack in a system, and even to retain the ability to register small shocks, as a desirable alternative to warning signals that never arrive because we have designed them out. Even at the level of economic recovery the experience of disability may shed light on how resilient economies can work well. In the same way that our bodies have two immune systems – two kidneys, two lungs etc – and thus more than one way of being able to function, we need, as a society, to have a preference for pathways that work well over a range of scenarios.

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Many artists have long known the transformative power of resilience. The Spanish artists Miro and Picasso both produced paintings of great pathos and hope under Franco's military rule. More humbly, at the 'Hardest Hit' rally in Manchester the singer Susan Hedges lifted the crowd when she sang 'Don't stop believin' '. Ian Dury, himself a disabled person, once told us that there weren't many ways of cheating death, but one was to be magnificent.

Art will be just one way of promoting resilience, but in austere times it may be one of the most important means of gaining supporters. The recently launched Disability Resilience Network is one vehicle for attaining resilience. It aims for a society that utilises the experiences, skills and other attributes of disabled people, a better understanding of resilience and the transfer of its qualities into other systems and structures to the benefit of all. The network is open to all and inclusive of all.

The Disability Resilience Network was launched on 19 September 2011. Members include council officers, representatives of insurance companies, experts in assistive technology and, of course, disabled people themselves.

In the current age of uncertainty, the network will produce thinking zone pamphlets on how to embed resilience in society and its structures to the advantage of disabled people. Members of the network are asked, in this first phase, to promote the thinking on resilience to decision-makers in the private, voluntary, public sector and elsewhere. They are asked to do this using the cultural norms of positivity, resourcefulness, creativity and humour.

For information about the Disability Resilience Network, contact Philip Connolly on 020 7391 3266 or email philip.connolly@rnib.org.uk