



Resilience can be taught: Yale-NUS study

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Not all is lost if you find yourself overwhelmed by work and school stress.

Being resilient is a skill that can be learnt, a recent study of Singapore university students has found.

The paper, which was published last month in academic journal *Current Psychology*, studied what made a group of 107 undergraduates resilient, identifying five components.

Ms Joanna Chue, who graduated from Yale-NUS College in 2019, and Assistant Professor of Social Sciences (Psychology) Cheung Hoi Shan co-authored the paper.

Their research, which took place

over about nine months from 2018 to 2019, showed that students who had a higher degree of resilience were less susceptible to burnout, or emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress over time.

Ms Chue, 25, now a research officer at a social service agency, said the study, using the widely used Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, identified five aspects of mental resilience: coping approaches, self-belief, putting in effort, having both internal and external resources, and spirituality.

Coping refers to actively seeking ways to solve problems, and self-belief is having the confidence in one's ability, for instance, to make difficult decisions.

Yale-NUS College graduate Joanna Chue (above left) and Assistant Professor Cheung Hoi Shan (above right) identified five aspects of mental resilience that made students less susceptible to burnout.
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Effort entails working hard to attain one's goals and being motivated by a sense of purpose.

Then there are internal resources, such as being able to find humour in one's situation, along with external resources, like having secure relationships and knowing where to seek help during adversity.

Lastly, spirituality refers to being better able to accept setbacks in the context of a higher purpose or faith.

While some components can be counted as traits or skills, most of them are "teachable" responses rather than innate parts of an individual's personality, said Prof Cheung.

"Not all is lost if we don't have the personality trait because resilience is very trainable."

Schools, parents and organisations must focus on intervention that develops resilience as skills or a learnt response, she added.

This could be "in terms of problem-solving skills, building your self-esteem, trust in your own ability, and teaching or learning ways to harness external resources", she said.

"So these are things we want to emphasise, instead of telling people that your personality is like that, that's not very helpful."

A subsequent study by Prof Cheung and Ms Chue of a separate group of nearly 100 undergraduates from Yale-NUS College showed that resilience could help lower burnout.

This, in turn, leads to less psychological distress and better mental well-being over time, a second survey of the respondents three months later showed.

Mental health has been a concern in Singapore in recent years, with schools incorporating the topic into character and citizenship education from this year.

The five factors of resilience uncovered by the study could be trained from a young age, said Prof Cheung, and parents are key role models in how they respond to difficult situations.

"If parents are result-oriented, that doesn't help in resilience training because it encourages children to be risk-averse," she said.

"That is why we are interested to get the message out – not just to schools, but also to families – to say that resilience is very trainable and can be adopted in everyday interactions with kids."