

Document name: What is resilience?
Document date: 2022
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OpenLearn course: Developing resilience in sport
OpenLearn url: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/developing-resilience-sport/content-section-overview>



What is resilience?

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Howells, K. (2022) 'Developing resilience on the athlete's journey', in Heaney, C., Kentzer, N. and Oakley, B. (eds) *Athletic Development: A Psychological Perspective*, London: Routledge, pp. 202–13.

What is resilience?

There are multiple definitions of resilience which have informed research and practice over the years (for an in-depth discussion of the definitions of resilience, see Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Sisto et al., 2019). The abundance of definitions has meant that there is a lack of consensus about what resilience is and, consequently, has been problematic for researchers interested in conducting research into resilience. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) explained that, in the absence of a consensus about how resilience is defined, it can be conceptualised as a trait, a process, or an outcome and this can lead to a tendency to misuse the term (e.g., conceptualising resilience as a fixed trait, as in ‘a resilient individual’). However, where there is consensus most definitions are consistent in noting the fundamental components of adversity and positive adaptation, where adversity is the main antecedent and positive adaptation is the main consequence (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013).

In relation to sport performers, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) coined a definition of resilience that encompasses both the qualities of resilience and its benefits; they defined it as “the role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors” (p. 675). This definition of psychological resilience (thereby distinguishing it from other forms of resilience such as physical or molecular resilience) has been broadly accepted by the sport and performance psychology community and is useful to inform applied practice. In later research, Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) distinguished between robust resilience and rebound resilience. Robust resilience, they argued, refers to resilience providing protection to the individual which is identifiable in the maintenance of wellbeing and performance levels whilst under pressure. Rebound resilience refers to the bounceback characteristics reflected in the minimal impact that adversity has on an individual’s wellbeing or performance. What is interesting and important for those involved in sport to appreciate relating to both concepts is they are not purely focused on the performance outcomes of athletes. Instead, both types of resilience adopt a more holistic view of the athlete incorporating the athlete’s wellbeing.

Although resilience research and its application in the sporting context has grown almost exponentially in the last decade, resilience is still a relatively new concept in sport psychology. The first systematic approach to consider resilience in sport was by Galli and Vealey (2008) who used Richardson et al. (1990) resiliency model as a guiding theoretical framework to explore college and professional athletes’ perceptions and experiences of resilience. Based on the findings of their qualitative study with ten high level athletes, the authors rejected the notion of as a trait. Rather, they conceptualised resilience as a process that involves both environmental (e.g., social support) and internal (e.g., competitiveness, confidence, being positive) processes that require cognitive appraisals and coping strategies to “mediate the relationship between personal and environmental resources and psychological outcomes of adversity” (p. 328).

Later, in a grounded theory examination of psychological resilience in Olympic champions, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) progressed the literature on resilience in sport by moving away from Galli and Vealey’s (2008) linear stage framework which they argued was biased towards coping focused processes. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) interviewed twelve Olympic champions (eight men and four

women) from a range of sports regarding their experiences of withstanding pressure during their sporting careers. Their analytical process involved a variant of grounded theory (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a research method that is concerned with the generation of theory which is grounded in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. In contrast to the deductive scientific method, it is inductive in nature. Specifically, in Fletcher and Sarkar's (2012) research, the analysis of the data from one interview often informed the direction and content of the next.

The researchers identified numerous psychological factors that protect the world's best athletes from the potential negative effect of stressors. They posited that central to their theory of resilience is the positive evaluation and meta-cognition (i.e., evaluation of own thoughts) of the stressors experienced by the individual. They referred to the positive evaluation as a challenge appraisal which occurs when the stressor (or adversity) is relevant to the individual's goals and the individual perceives that their resources are sufficient to cope with the demands placed upon them. In addition to these positive evaluations, Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) highlighted that in their study, elite athletes were able to withstand the demands of their experiences through meta-cognition. In addition to positive evaluation and meta-cognition, they argued that an integral aspect of withstanding pressure are the psychological characteristics that individuals high in resilience possess. They refer to five psychological factors, namely: positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support. The relationship between challenge appraisal, meta-cognition, and individual characteristics (e.g., positive personality, confidence, focus) can be seen in Figure 1.

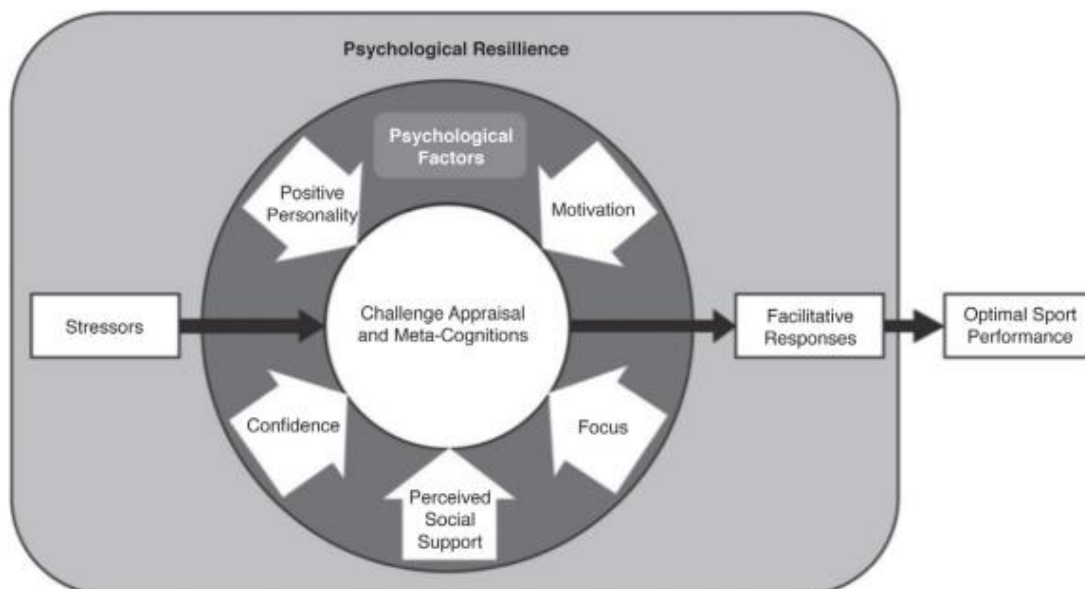


FIGURE 1 A grounded theory of psychological resilience and optimal sport performance. Source: Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, p. 672

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