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Title: Resilience: Another perspective (Autism MOOC)

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Hey, everybody. My name is Daniel Wendler and today I'd like to talk to you about resilience.

You might be wondering, 'Well, what is resilience?' Well, I'm going to tell you. Resilience is the ability to get back up after being knocked down. It's the ability to adapt to challenging situations and to keep going even when things get difficult. In a nutshell, it means that when things are hard, you don't give up. You figure out a way to keep moving forward. You might be wondering, 'Well, that's nice, but why are you talking about resilience here?' Well, resilience is one of the most important abilities for somebody on the autistic spectrum. And notice that I said 'abilities', because it's something that can be built. It's something that can be learned.

Resilience is one of the most important abilities for somebody on the autistic spectrum because people on the autistic spectrum have so many challenges that require resilience to overcome. Everything from adapting to sensory environments that are unpleasant to navigating social situations - all of those are difficult and challenging and stressful for somebody on the autistic spectrum, and the temptation is to give up - it's to withdraw, it's to have a meltdown, it's just not go to the party or not to go whatever the situation is that's going to be difficult. And so resilience is really key for being able to engage with those difficult situations. And engaging with difficult situations is important because the more that you engage with them, the better able you are to handle them.

That's where the adaptation piece of it comes in. Resilience means that if you keep doing a hard thing, it gets easier. It's kind of like working out. If I lift a particular weight over and over, eventually, as I get stronger, it becomes easier to lift that weight.

Let me give you an example that'll maybe help illustrate it. When I was younger, I went to a theme park with my family and the environment was so stressful for me with all the noise and all the people that I just couldn't handle it. I had a meltdown. I was screaming, I was crying, I was not a happy camper. Um...and I...I... There was nothing that I could do. There was nothing that my family could do that would allow me to be able to be in that situation. I just couldn't handle it.

But then fast forward to a year or two ago, when I went to a cousin's wedding, and I was once again with my family in a busy, loud, crowded situation but this time I was able to handle it. And why was that? Well, two things.

Number one - I had spent a lot of time in busy, stressful, loud, crowded environments, and each time I was there, I spent a little bit longer, a little bit longer, until eventually I had a strong ability to stay in a busy, crowded environment for quite a long time.

And number two - I had built up a library of coping strategies that I could use to calm myself down when I was in those stressful environments. For instance, at the wedding, when I would get too overwhelmed during the reception, I would just go and sit in the bathroom for a couple of minutes, let myself calm down and then come back to the social event.

So, those are some of the ways that resilience has helped me, and there's a couple of insights that I'd like to draw from that to, um...to teach everybody else. Specifically, I want to talk about how you build resilience as somebody on the autistic spectrum, because I think I've described what it looks like, I've described how valuable it is, but you might be asking, 'OK, well, how do I get it?' Well, first, realise that resilience is a spectrum. It's not all or nothing. It's not like you flip a switch and you either have resilience or you don't. It's something that everybody has but just to greater or lesser degrees. So your goal is to get a little bit more resilient than you are right now, and just continue that process.

Again, think of it like working out. If you go to the gym, the goal is not to lift 500 pounds the first time you go. The goal is to lift a weight that's kind of challenging for you but not that bad, and then the next time you go back, maybe you're going to lift a weight that's a little bit more challenging, and over and over until you become very strong. It's the same thing with resilience.

Try to do things that are a little bit harder than what you're comfortable with. So, for instance, let's say you go to a social event and it's loud and it's uncomfortable and you'd like to leave. Maybe tell yourself, "You know what? I'm going to stay here for five minutes. I'm going to build my resilience by just toughing it out for five minutes and letting myself be in this environment and trying to be social for five minutes." Then you can leave.

And then next time you come, maybe you say, "You know what? I'm going to do that for eight minutes." And then next time maybe it's 10 minutes. Like, little by little, you're going to build your ability to stay in those stressful environments without needing to give up.

Number two - I really recommend that you build your coping strategies, because part of it is just building the endurance and, like, staying in the situation, but part of it is building coping strategies so the stressful situations aren't as stressful. So I recommend figure out the situations that really stress you out and then build some coping strategies that will help you manage that stress.

So if loud noise bothers you, maybe bring some earplugs with you. If crowds really get to you, maybe identify some quiet places that you can go where you can recharge. These strategies will really help you stay in these stressful situations for longer and build your resilience. And finally, don't try to build resilience on your own. Don't try to do any of this stuff on your own. Get a support network. Talk to friends, talk to family. Join a support group for social anxiety or for the autistic spectrum.

Find people that can give you encouragement, that can give you advice, that can let you know that they believe in you and that they know that it's hard and they're proud of you for doing it anyway.

You might also consider seeing a professional counsellor or therapist, because those people can not only encourage you but they can also provide you with a lot of really helpful coping strategies. However you do it, go and find your support network. Go and build people around you that can help you build this resilience. And I think that if you have that system in place, if you've got a support network, if you've got some coping strategies that you can rely on and if you push yourself to do a little bit more every day than you did yesterday, you're going to find that your resilience starts to build.

You're going to find that things that used to be overwhelming for you are maybe still unpleasant but something that you can handle, something that you can manage. You're going to find that you're growing in your resilience, and that's going to have a huge impact on your ability to face the challenges of autism and to just face the challenges of life. It may be that you end up being an inspiration to the people around you - both autistic people and people not on the spectrum who can look at your resilience and say, "Man, that is a person that knows how to face a challenge head-on and not give up."

So I encourage you - build your resilience and one day you'll be somebody that other people will point to and admire.