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Title	Why resilience isn't always the answer to coping with challenging times
Authors	Dineen, Katy
Publication date	2020-09-29
Original Citation	Dineen, K. (2020) 'Why resilience isn't always the answer to coping with challenging times', The Conversation, 29 Sept. Available at: https://theconversation.com/why-resilience-isnt-always-the-answer-to-coping-with-challenging-times-145796
Type of publication	Contribution to newspaper/magazine
Link to publisher's version	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/
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Download date	2026-11-02 03:29:48
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10671

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Why resilience isn’t always the answer to coping with challenging times

September 29, 2020 3.33pm BST

The word “resilience” has been used frequently throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Medics, business leaders and teachers have all been encouraged to build resilience in order to address the needs of their communities.

However, advocating resilience in the current context may not be the best way forward. Another option is hope.

My own research in philosophy of education emphasises the valuable role hope can play. Hope can help students think of themselves as capable of setting goals and finding creative ways of achieving those goals, even in the face of their own

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limitations and the inescapable uncertainty that surrounds them. In the current climate, too, hope may be a more useful tool for dealing with crisis.

Bouncing back

At the heart of resilience is the claim that humans have the capability to recover or even grow in the face of adversity. In the current crisis, these ideas – resilience, grit and the ability to bounce back – are understandably seductive. As one advert commissioned by Universities UK puts it, in the face of adversity, "2020 made us stronger".

Yet, for all their power, ideas like grit and resilience can be controversial. Research shows that resilience and grit is not the only – or even the best – route to success. For academic success, other factors such as attendance and study habits are much better predictors of success than grit or resilience.



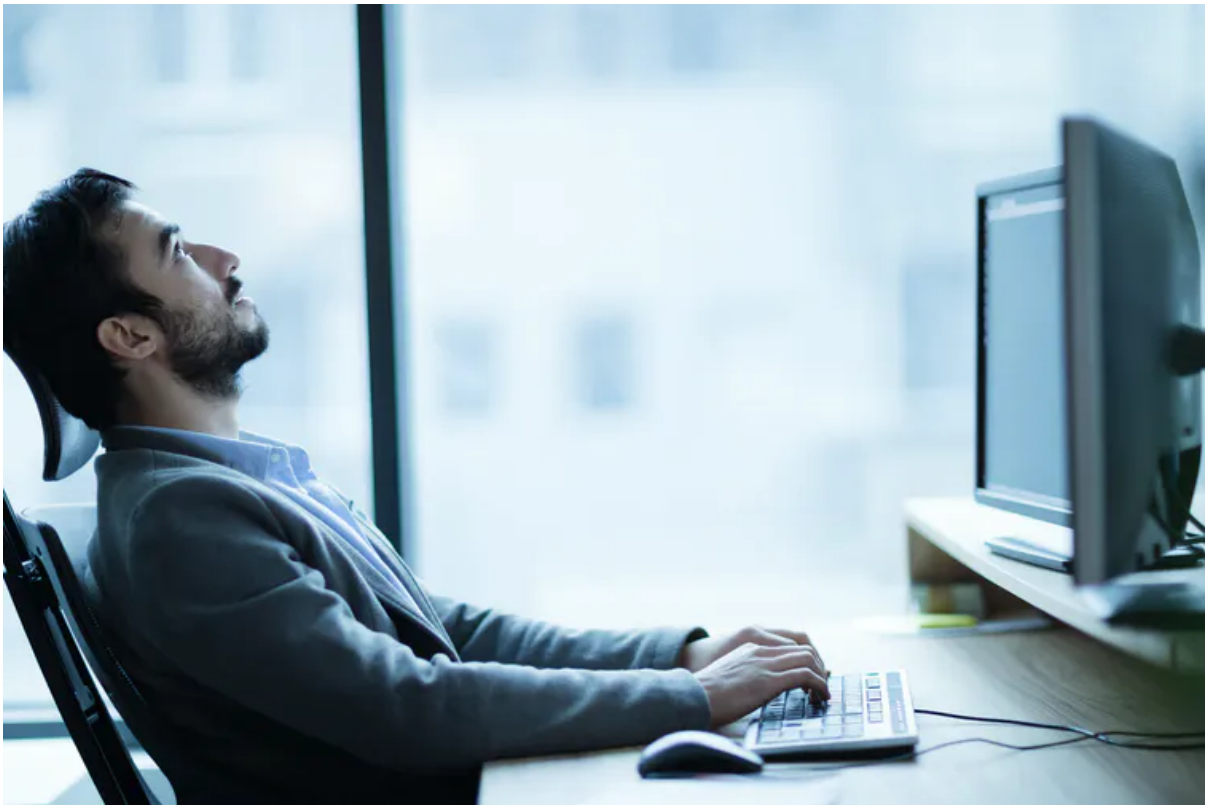
Research found that study habits were a better predictor of success than resilience. Jacob Lund/Shutterstock

Advocates of grit claim that it is composed of two elements: perseverance of effort and consistency of interest. Of the two, consistency is the more problematic. Consistency in this context is understood as the continuous and inflexible pursuit of goals. This idea of consistency may not be the most helpful way to deal with a pandemic and deepening global mental health crisis.

Bad habits

Resilience is often promoted in workplaces and by practitioners of organisational psychology as an ideal to which workers should aspire. However, this can be dangerous.

Promoting resilience may be asking employees to remain overly tolerant of unpleasant or counterproductive circumstances. Rather than pushing for change – either through a change of job or fighting for improved workplace conditions – these employees will consistently follow goals once set. Success then becomes the ability to endure stress, and perhaps even abuse.



Promoting resilience may encourage employees to tolerate a bad working environment. NDAB Creativity/Shutterstock

The danger is that employees who show the signs of work-related stress will be seen as lacking resilience. Poor working conditions may be ignored in favour of blaming the victim of a negligent (or worse) workplace. As recent research shows, while resilience can be a rational approach, this rationality depends on the circumstances.

In our context, there is a real possibility that some of us may fail to meet the goals we set for ourselves pre-COVID. Employees, parents and children may suffer debilitating distress and anxiety. We are not rubber balls, made to bounce back on demand. A focus on resilience may encourage us to blame ourselves if we find ourselves failing to grow stronger through adversity.

Turning to hope

Hope is an alternative to resilience. Hope is the capacity to identify meaningful goals, the steps necessary to attain them and the motivation to take these steps. The difference between hope and resilience is that, where resilience is conceptualised as a return to a normal state of functioning following a stressful event or situation, hope is based on the idea of reaching a goal.

Read more:* *'Hope' isn't mere wishful thinking – it's a valuable tool we can put to work in a crisis

Teachers can introduce this idea of hope into the classroom by sharing some of their hopes and vulnerabilities with their students. By doing this, a teacher can model how they identify and plan to reach goals, while also speaking honestly about fear and uncertainty in the presence of COVID-19.

These fears and vulnerabilities can have a paralysing effect and may mean temporary demotivation or even letting go of long treasured goals. Giving up specific goals should not lead to hopelessness. Instead it can provide an occasion to reflect on other goals more easily realisable during a global pandemic.

At the political level, a commitment to prioritising hope over resilience may mean that governments work towards providing a realistic vision of what life might be like after the pandemic. At the community level, sustaining hope might depend on policy makers, employers and teachers recognising that goals may have to change.

Some of us may not bounce back to our pre-COVID selves and our goals may reflect this change. Yet, if we can help each other to hang onto a bit of hope in the face of this adversity, we may have all the resources we will need to find meaning in the post-COVID world.

Philosophy **Hope** **Resilience** **COVID-19** **Coronavirus insights**