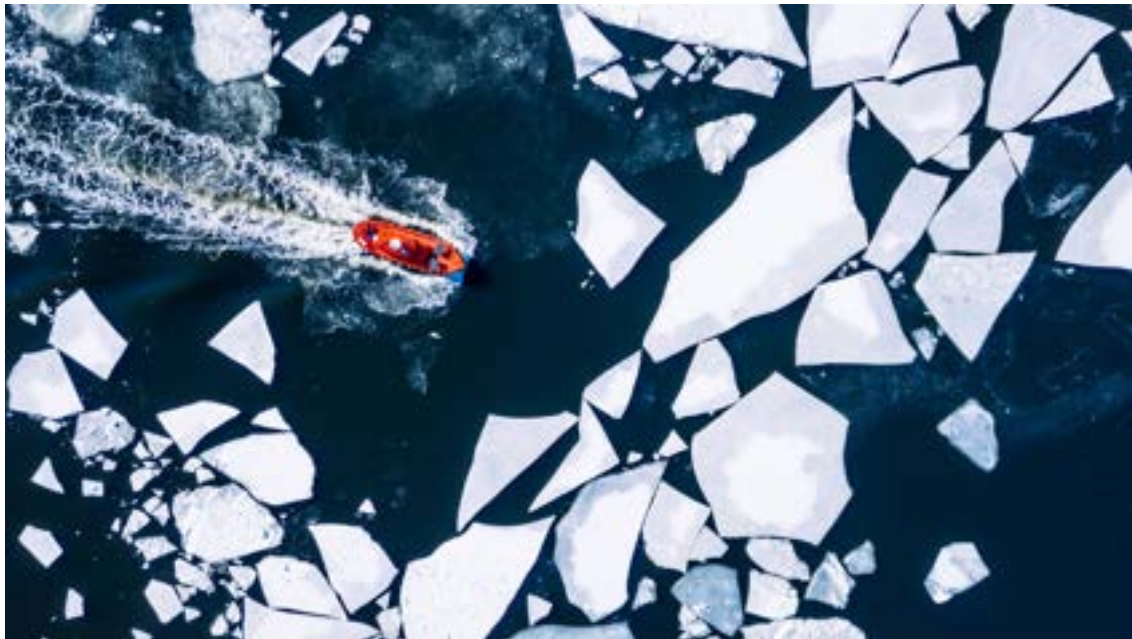


# What Really Makes Us Resilient?

by Marcus Buckingham

September 29, 2020



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**Summary.** What is resilience, and how can each of us cultivate it in our own lives? The ADP Research Institute conducted two field studies. The first identified the sources of resilience, pinpointing the best questions to measure it, and providing specific prescriptions to... [\*\*more\*\*](#)

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Eleven years ago my friend Sally was diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, the degenerative motor-neuron disease which gradually renders you unable to move, to eat, to talk, and in the end to breathe. She had just turned 40, two kids, happily married to a prince of a guy, so much to look forward to, for all of them. And then this horrible suffering. This "very slow car crash" was her husband's description and I can't get that image out of my head. The wreckage, the brokenness, the inevitability of pain, and nothing anyone can do about it but look on helplessly. "I think I'm disappearing," Sally told me back then. "What am I going to do when no one sees me anymore?"

Today, against all the odds, she is still alive. Yes, she can't move, or talk, or eat, or breathe on her own, but she has not disappeared. Instead, with the aid of her eye-powered talking machine, she is as feisty and loving and wise as she ever was. Sally can convey more meaning in one glance than most of us can in a 20-minute rant. "How do you do it?" I asked her. "How do you stay so strong for your hubby, for your kids?"

"There are so many things I can't do, Marcus," she replied. "But why bother looking at those? Instead I spend all my time focused on those few things I can do. I can still love my husband. I can still love my kids. I'm still here."

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She is so very present. And these days folks like Sally have so much to teach all of us about resilience. For more than a decade she has been sheltering in place, socially distancing herself from those who might infect her, unable to get out and move around, and yet she has retained her verve and her spirit. Would that we all could tap into such reserves of strength and forbearance. Would that we could all sway in the face of life's awful challenges and bounce back

stronger than we ever were. What is it that Sally had access to? Was it simply a part of her genetic makeup that allowed her not to cave, or was it something she did consciously? What is this thing called resilience, and how can each of us cultivate it in our own lives?

To begin to answer these questions, my team at the ADP Research Institute undertook two field studies. The first focused on identifying the sources of resilience, pinpointing the best questions to measure it, and then playing out the specific prescriptions to increase resilience in yourself and those you lead and care about. You can find the full set of results [here](#).

The second was a global study of resilience around the world. We asked 25,000 working adults in 25 countries 10 key questions about resilience. In each country we first constructed a sample stratified to reflect the demographic make-up of that country's workforce, and then in July 2020 we posed these 10 questions to determine the percentage of workers in each country who were highly resilient.

My thesis going in was that those countries which had responded most effectively to the Covid-19 epidemic — as measured by number of deaths and cases per million — would display the most resilient workforce. I expected countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea would show very high levels of resilience, whereas countries such as Brazil, India, and the U.S. would have comparatively lower levels of resilience. The U.S., for example, has only 4% of the world's population, yet more than 20% of the world's Covid cases. Surely this outsized number of cases would have had a negative effect on resilience levels.

I was wrong. My thesis didn't hold up. Instead a very different pattern emerged, one that revealed not only how you can build resilience in your own life, but also why so many of our senior

leaders are pursuing the wrong path in their attempts to increase resilience in those they lead.

## Our Findings

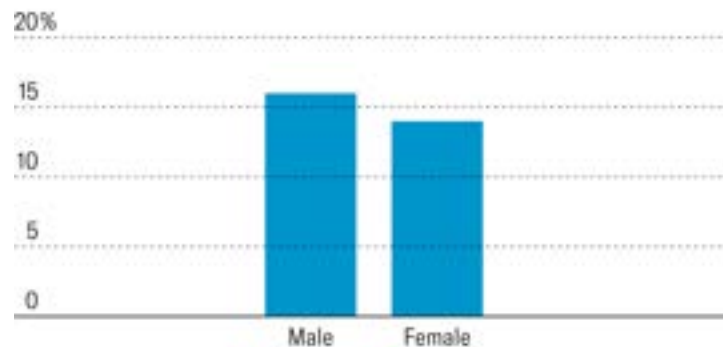
To begin with, let's dispense with some factors which you might be wondering about.

Resilience levels are not connected to gender — men and women around the world have almost exactly the same levels of resilience. Nor does age seem to be a significant factor.

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### Men and Women Report Similar Levels of Resilience in the Face of Covid-19

% of people rated "highly resilient," by gender



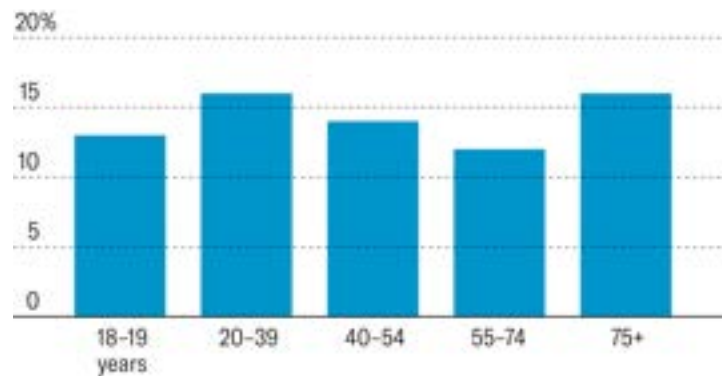
Source: ADPRI Workplace Resilience Study, 2020

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## Age Does Not Appear to Be a Factor When It Comes to Resilience in the Face of Covid-19

% of people rated "highly resilient," by age



Source: ADPRI Workplace Resilience Study, 2020

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Neither were there strong correlations between resilience and ethnicity or nationality.

Instead, we found that there were two primary drivers of resilience which, taken together, lead to an interesting and counterintuitive prescription:

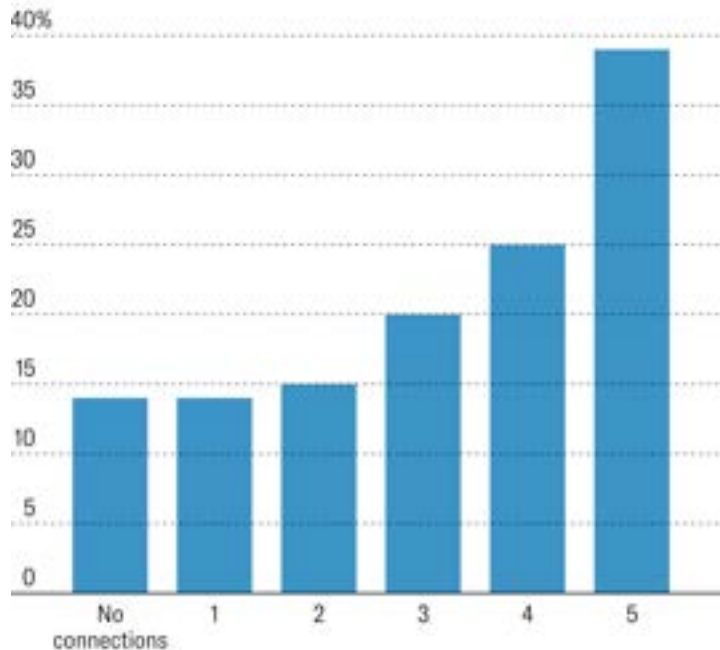
### **1. Resilience is a reactive state of mind created by exposure to suffering.**

In our study we asked people if they had had Covid themselves, if someone in their family had Covid, if someone on their work team had it, and if someone in their wider circle had it. Those people who responded in the affirmative to each of these questions were 3.9 times more likely to be highly resilient.

## Proximity to Covid-19 Increases Resilience

Respondents with personal connections to multiple people who had contracted Covid-19 were more likely to be highly resilient.

% of people rated "highly resilient,"  
by number of personal Covid-19 connections



Source: ADPRI Workplace Resilience Study, 2020

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It didn't matter how effective or ineffective your country had been in responding to the pandemic. What drove your level of resilience was a function of how intimately exposed you, yourself, had been: The more exposed you were, the higher your resilience levels.

This strongly suggests that we discover our resilience only when we are forced to meet unavoidable suffering full in the face. It's when we face that reality, and see ourselves and how we respond to it, that we find the basis for resilience. The real is almost always less scary than the imagined, and the reality of the disease helps you with knowing what you're capable of, which is strengthening.

## **2. The more tangible the threat, the more resilient we become.**

In our survey we asked people if they had experienced any changes in their working conditions as a result of Covid — sheltered in place, change in work hours, layoffs or furloughs, increased use of technology, etc. We gave people a list of 11 possible changes.

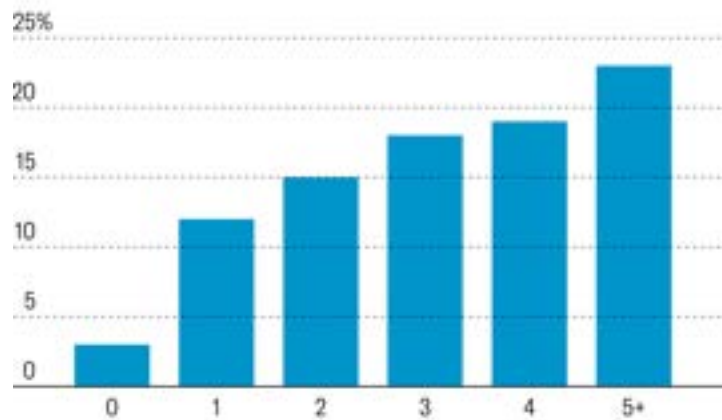
Ninety-six percent of people around the world reported that they'd experienced at least one of these changes. No surprise there. But what was surprising was that some people had experienced more than five of these changes. Those that did were not only more convinced that these changes would be permanent, but they were also 13 times more likely to be highly resilient. In other words, if you had been forced to absorb significant changes in your work you had increased levels of resilience. In fact, the more changes you had to absorb, the more resilient you were.

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## Experiencing Multiple Work-Related Changes Due to Covid-19 Increases Resilience

These changes could include sheltering in place, changes in work hours, layoffs or furloughs, and an increased use of technology, among others.

% of people rated "highly resilient,"  
by number of Covid-19-related work changes



Source: ADPRI Workplace Resilience Study, 2020

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Combine findings one and two, and you realize that we humans do not function well when our senior leaders gloss over the reality. We don't need them to sugarcoat in order to make us feel better. It won't. It is far more frightening, and damaging to the psyche, to downplay tough or dark realities, or to pretend they don't exist, because then we allow our imaginations to run riot, and who knows what kind of demons we can conjure in our mind's eye.

Instead of downplaying the reality, tell it to us straight. Don't rush us back to normal in an effort to assuage our fear and anxiety. Instead, describe in detail what the threat actually is. Show us up close and personal what real-world changes we will have to make in our lives, and tell us the truth about how these changes are designed to protect us. Show us in practice what our "new normal" is and why, and then trust us to figure out how to live happily and healthily inside this new normal.



Many of our leaders are not giving us enough credit. Psychologist Viktor Frankl told us back in the 1930s: Our response to unavoidable suffering is one of the primary sources in our lives of meaning and purpose and self-efficacy. Suffering and difficulty must never be hidden from us. Instead, show them to us honestly and clearly and we will reveal — to ourselves and to you — our greatest strength.

Sally's greatest fears preceded the worst symptoms of ALS. It was the waiting, and waiting, that terrified her. Once the symptoms came, it was still awful and so difficult, but then at least she could take their measure, understand what they were truly going to feel like for her, and she could begin to figure out the practical, real-world business of how to live — with strength and grace and resilience.

Our research suggests that the same applies to you and me. It's the unknown that scares us. Show us the truth about our threats, and we will reveal the true reserves of our power.

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**Marcus Buckingham** is a researcher of high performance at work, co-creator of StrengthsFinder and StandOut, and a coauthor of *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World* (Harvard Business Review Press). His most recent book is *Love + Work: How to Find What You Love, Love What You Do, and Do It for the Rest of Your Life* (Harvard Business Review Press).

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