Resilience in College Students

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FROM THE EDITORS

Resilience in College Students

Tell us if these statements sound familiar to you:

"College students can’t emotionally handle a B, let alone an F, these days."
"These kids just aren’t resilient anymore."
"Millenials have less coping skills than we did in my day."
"Why can’t they just grow up and deal with reality like we did?"

Lately, it feels like we hear statements like this more and more. While we could joke about this being a few small steps removed from a movie with Clint Eastwood scowling on his porch at the neighborhood kids, this perception, of Millennial students being less resilient, seems to be seriously working its way into our developmental conceptualization of recent college student generations.

So, we could not resist adding our humble two cents into this discussion. Are students really less resilient, or do we just perceive them to be less resilient? In the interest of generating reflection and discussion (and hardly providing a conclusive argument), let us explore this phenomenon more closely.

This resilience concern seems tied to observing college students struggling more than students (or we) did in the past with similar issues. We (college counselors) see the ways they react to bad grades, setbacks in personal and romantic lives, or just the everyday challenges of living and we think that they are responding more erratically or in less adaptive ways. In turn, we attribute this to a lack or absence of ability to resiliently cope with the world around them.

This, we assume, may be tied to a culture that offers immediate gratification via social media, constant contact and communication, and parents who hover, helicopter, or bulldoze, removing obstacles and limiting chances for learning to deal with stress. Simultaneously it seems students have higher expectations and more demands than ever, with fewer abilities to deal with roadblocks. Not only does this argument seem to make common sense and feel right but it also appears to match up to our experience.

And yet, we (the editors) wonder about these assumptions. After all, comparisons to different times and generations are tricky and complicated. Looking backwards, we are subject to what the phenomenologists have called shifting horizons (Gushman, 1996). The concept embodies the idea that things were better "back then," especially when the future does not seem as bright as it once was. Certainly, the reverse—that we live in the best of all times—is also problematic. This speaks to the importance of considering context and culture when making comparative statements.

Indeed, similar to psychological precursors like "ego strength" and "will/perseverance," resilience is not a naturally occurring phenomena but instead a person-made, theoretical construction. We cannot directly measure the quantity of resilience in a college student in 1967 against a student in 2017. This concept is subjectively and culturally defined. We have to ask ourselves: what represented resiliency across peers in 1967? What represents resilience across college students now? Ways of enacting and performing resilience may be different between these two time periods. But, can we say one generation’s style is better or worse, more or less?
For example, let us think of some of the differences between the 21st century college environment (and high school before it) compared to the academic, social, and cultural environment that existed two, three, or more decades ago. Millennial college students are likely to have faced enormous academic, extra-curricular, and athletic expectations from a young age. They are more specialized and goal directed. They may also hold more part-time work hours than previous generations, given a harsh financial climate for many families over the past decade. Moreover, they have been instructed to do all this while being more open to seeking help, having been (correctly, we think) told that mental health issues are real and important and so should not be stigmatized.

Alternatively, in the middle to late 20th century, resilience may have been more connected with a type of stoicism. Certainly, there were real challenges in the 20th century, but they were of a different nature, i.e., more clearly existential in the case of the cold war, or tied into social justice as with the culture clashes of the 1970s. Even then, there was the awareness that if people were committed to work and a career they could achieve a certain financial and social stability. In this regard, students then knew if they kept their heads down and kept going, they would likely be alright. Stigma around mental health perhaps led to greater shame about opening up—perhaps “resilience” masked real psychic pain.

Do the greater pressures that this generation faces combined with being a more emotionally open and expressive group mean that they are less resilient? Or, does it mean that they have less resilience in some areas but more in others?

Take for instance, the idea of relationships. Socially, college students may be simultaneously more socially connected (through innovation in technology and social media) and less socially connected to deeper, consistent, intimate familial and social connections. We could argue this generation connects and relates differently than previous generations. Maybe they have more quantity and perhaps less quality regarding social connection. In a resilient way, this generation may have more outlets to express themselves. They certainly have more access to outlets that validate students who would otherwise feel ostracized or “othered.” These increased conduits for connection may represent an improved way of coping among Millennials. They can feel less alone and isolated. On the other hand, students may be overstimulated by the constant opportunities to connect. They feel pressure to connect at all times and worry about being alone. Similarly, this generation is less likely to stay in a home town where they’ve developed close relationships for much of their life. Given this unique social environment for Millennials, they may urgently need opportunities to learn to establish deeper intimacy.

While hardly definitive, we hope that this brief comparison encourages college counselors to first consider their bias about how resilience is defined. There may be some concerns related to socialization that require attention among this generation, but we need not judge Millennial coping with a broad, critical brush.

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Editors

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