PROMOTING CAPABILITIES TO MANAGE POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS

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Perspectives on Resilience

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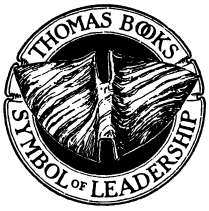

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We dedicate this book to the police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, and emergency personnel who without regard for their own safety faced the brutal terrorist attack on New York City and Washington, D.C. We owe a debt of gratitude for the service of these brave men and women. Our sincere condolences to the survivors of those who perished as a result of their bravery. We sincerely hope that the sacrifices made will ensure the future of freedom throughout the world.

FOREWORD

"*The Real Professionals Are Just Fine.*" That is what Police Lieutenant John P. King tells us. Lt. King has been a police officer for many years and has experienced many traumatic incidents.

Following is Lt. King's analysis of police and emergency worker resiliency:

> In watching the television news one day, I observed an interview with a person offering his services to the Police and Fire departments to "debrief" our personnel regarding a fatal auto accident that occurred in the early morning hours on that day. I don't *know* this person, nor have I had any contact with him, nor will I have any contact with him. The officers who experience disturbing incidents almost every day at work are just fine, and if anyone of us did want or need some type of stress counseling or "debriefing" we have our own Employee Assistance Program available to us. I have no problem letting people *know* that in the past I have utilized our EAP and it is nothing short of extraordinary.
>
> In our job as professional law enforcement officers, we are confronted with frightening sights and terrifying incidents on a regular basis. That is why this job is not for everyone. In this job you must have the dedication, sincerity, integrity, compassion, and professionalism to get the job done, no matter what the circumstances. "The Job," that is what we term what we as police do, entails many things. Sometimes we are called upon to give aid to citizens, sometimes we are called upon to settle disputes, and sometimes we are called upon to break up fights. There are times we are involved in high-speed pursuits, and there are times we are attacked and beaten. Then there are times when we are in dark yards, alleys, or buildings, searching for drug dealers, persons with guns, rapists, robbers, felons wanted on warrants, the list goes on and on. Whatever the circumstances or the conditions, you must do the job and keep your wits about you, or you become a liability, or a victim yourself. Then one of the true professionals will have to be taken away from the task at hand in order to assist you.
>
> That is why police officers become the professionals that they are. They have been well trained and have developed their skills through practical use of their training. Also, they have experienced all types of tragedy, catastrophe,

violence and witnessed untold horrors throughout their careers. In so doing, these officers have developed the skills and fortitude that it takes to handle the extremely varied incidents that they are put into on a day-to-day basis.

I assume that most mental health professionals are sincere in offering their services to emergency workers. I would not fault anyone for that. But in the future, it would be better to check with the people in question to see if they want or need that service. I believe that unnecessary and sometimes unwanted "debriefings" could lead the public to believe that the men and women police officers might not be up to doing their jobs. This is simply not the case. I have been a senior supervisor at many incidents, and I can tell you first-hand that all personnel from all agencies conduct themselves with the utmost professionalism. I am proud of them all and I generally tell them that at the time.

In closing, it must always be necessary to check with those involved before you "debrief" or speak for them or on their behalf. They may not need such services. Finally, let me reiterate. The police are just fine, thank you.

Lt. John P. King, "E" District,
Buffalo, NY Police Department[1]

Lt. King's remarks echo the theme of this book: resiliency . Resiliency is the basis of keeping emergency, disaster workers, and others exposed to trauma "protected" from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Attention in this regard has focused on how some people and even entire groups or organizations, can "bounce back" from trauma, and in some cases, experience growth. As described in Lt. King's comments, there should be a realization that professionals such as police officers, firefighters, and emergency services personnel handle such events very well. We have only to look to the recent New York City and Pentagon terrorist disasters as an example. Emergency personnel reacted in a professional manner and helped to keep order in one of the most horrible incidents to ever have occurred in the United States. It is to them that we owe a debt of gratitude, and a commitment to understand the amazing resilient nature of their responses to the tragedies of life. This book may help to open the door to such understanding.

John M. Violanti
Douglas Paton
Leigh M. Smith

1. Used with permission.

PREFACE

Assumptions of an automatic link between exposure to adverse events such as traumatic incidents and disasters and the development of dysfunctional or pathological traumatic stress reactions are being increasingly challenged. Such suppositions are being replaced by the belief that many people and groups can, following exposure to hazardous or adverse situations, display remarkable levels of resilience. That is, they can readily regain prior levels of functioning, "bounce back" or adapt, and in some cases experience personal growth, as a consequence of their adverse experience.

Despite growing empirical support for this reality, this paradigm has yet to be fully assimilated within the fabric of mainstream mental health research and practice. Nor has it been encapsulated within the culture or staff and organizational development strategies within "high risk" (e.g., law enforcement, fire service, health care, emergency management) professions. One reason for this has been the lack of a comprehensive source that presents relevant research findings and practices in a form that assists understanding this complex phenomenon and that provides direction for the practical application of the ensuing recommendations.

This book provides a systematic review of the variables and mechanisms that underpin resilience and growth in professions who face a high risk of regular and repetitive exposure to adverse or hazardous events. Given the inevitability of this exposure, promoting the acceptance and practice of this paradigm is essential for facilitating the capability of emergency responders to adapt to, and if possible to grow from, adverse and hazardous experience.

By identifying salient dispositional, cognitive, group, organizational, and environmental predictors of resilience and articulating the mechanisms that link them to adaptive and growth outcomes, emergency organizations will have the capacity to intervene prior to exposure to adverse events, rather than waiting until after the event, as is currently the norm. This book thus adopts an approach that is fundamentally preventative in nature and offers practical suggestions to support the development of resilient capabilities. By describing influences on this capability that cover the person, the organization, and factors external to the workplace, it offers a more ecologically com-

prehensive approach to those working in this area. In addition, it offers a more comprehensive framework for this work by drawing on constructs (e.g., trust, empowerment) that would ordinarily lie outside mainstream traumatic stress research.

The contents of this book provide a theoretically and empirically rigorous knowledge base and intervention framework capable of mitigating negative reactions, facilitating adaptation in the face of adversity, and enhancing the likelihood that adverse and traumatic work experiences will enrich the personal and professional lives of those who dedicate themselves to protecting and safeguarding others. When this happens, their capability for dealing with hazardous and adverse work experiences will increase substantially, as will confidence in the planning that precedes their deployment to deal with the emergencies and disasters that are all too frequent facets of the working lives of emergency, law enforcement, and helping professionals.

Douglas Paton
John M. Violanti
Leigh M. Smith

CONTENTS

PROMOTING CAPABILITIES TO MANAGE POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS

Chapter 1

POSTTRAUMATIC PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS: INDIVIDUAL, GROUP, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE AND GROWTH

DOUGLAS PATON, JOHN M. VOILANTI, AND LEIGH M. SMITH

On the occasion of every accident that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have to turn it to use.

Epictetus 60–120A.D.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a long history of focusing on the pathological outcomes that can accompany exposure to adverse events such as traumatic incidents and disasters, recent decades have witnessed a progressive realization that such outcomes are not inevitable. Attention in this regard has focused on why and how some people and groups, following exposure to hazardous or adverse situations, can regain prior levels of functioning, "bounce back" or adapt, and in some cases experience personal growth. In this text we use the term "resilience" to refer to the former and "growth" to describe the latter.

What is surprising about the revelations emerging from these more searching analyses of how people experience their encounters with adversity is not that psychological resilience and growth can result from exposure to even extreme adversity, but that, as evinced by the quote from Epictetus, it has taken so long for these possibilities to become subjects for rigorous scientific study. It would appear that this lesson of history has been neither learned

nor accommodated within the fabric of mainstream mental health research and practice.

The objective of this book is to begin the systematic analysis of variables and mechanisms that underpin resilience and growth in professions (e.g., law enforcement, fire service, health care, and emergency management) who face a high risk of regular and repetitive exposure to adverse or hazardous events (Paton & Violanti, 1996; Violanti & Paton, 1999; Violanti, Paton & Dunning, 2000). Given the inevitability of this exposure, we owe it to those who dedicate their lives to protecting and safeguarding others to facilitate, as far as possible, their capability to adapt to, or bounce back from, adverse experience and to maximize the likelihood that such exposure contributes to enriching their personal and professional lives. The first step in this process involves defining the core constructs.

RESILIENCE AND GROWTH

Resilience we define as the capacity of individuals, communities and organizations, and the systems that facilitate their performance to maintain relationships and balance between elements in the presence of significant disturbances because of a capability to draw on their resources and competencies to manage the demands, challenges, and changes encountered. Resilience describes a capability for "bouncing back" following exposure to adversity. Implicit within this definition is the notion that individuals, groups, and organizations can return to prior levels of functioning. We are also interested in adaptative processes that are marked by growth. Here we adopt Tedeschi and Calhoun's (Ch. 2) definition of posttraumatic growth (PTG) as a significant beneficial change in cognitive and emotional life beyond previous levels of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness that occur in the aftermath of psychological traumas that challenge previously existing assumptions about self, others, and the future.

Although conceptually distinct, a relationship between resilience and growth can be envisaged. For example, Kumpfer (1999) described a resilience process model that links diverse personal, group, and environmental resources with the following outcomes: resilient reintegration (which corresponds to the definition of growth used earlier); homeostatic reintegration (which corresponds to the definition of resilience presented previously; maladaptive reintegration (which represents increased vulnerability); and dysfunctional reintegration. This suggests that, in addition to identifying resilience factors, we must also consider their relationship with adaptational and growth outcomes. Where possible, authors allude to this relationship in

their respective chapters, with the issue being dealt with in detail by Smith and Violanti (Ch. 13).

The need to distinguish between growth and distress outcomes represents another theme emerging from more critical analyses of how adverse events are experienced. For example, Hart and Wearing (1995) demonstrated that, following a review of their work on stress in police officers, that distress and well-being were separate, orthogonal constructs, each influenced by discrete sets of factors. While considerable effort has been expended on investigating the precursors of loss and pathological outcomes, less emphasis has been placed on resilience and growth in those regularly exposed, in a professional capacity, to adverse events. It is the predictable, regular, and repetitive aspect of the work experience of high-risk professions that makes understanding resilience and growth so important. If we can identify salient predictors of resilience and can articulate the mechanisms that link them to adaptive and growth outcomes, we will be in a better position to intervene to enhance this capacity prior to exposure to adverse events.

The Nature of Resilience

The first stage in this process involves describing the variables that have been demonstrated, or hypothesized, to facilitate resilience and growth, and evaluating their actual or potential contribution in this regard. In this book we consider this issue from dispositional, cognitive, group, and environmental perspectives (Fig. 1.1). Dispositional resilience reflects how personal characteristics (e.g., hardiness) affect adjustment. This concept is amenable to application in organizational contexts through selection and assessment. The cognitive component is concerned with the individual's sense of coherence and meaning. In organizations, training and development strategies, and the overarching culture of the organization, represent means for facilitating a capability to impose coherence and meaning on atypical, adverse experiences. Although emergency workers may work on their own, it is more likely that they will find themselves working in teams, usually with members of their own profession, but often with members of other professions. Consequently, we must examine the factors that influence group or team resilience. The final element, the environmental characteristics and practices required to foster and sustain resilience, can be cultivated through, for example, organizational design and management development strategies that create practices, procedures, and a culture that mitigate adverse consequences and maximize potential for adaptation and posttraumatic growth.

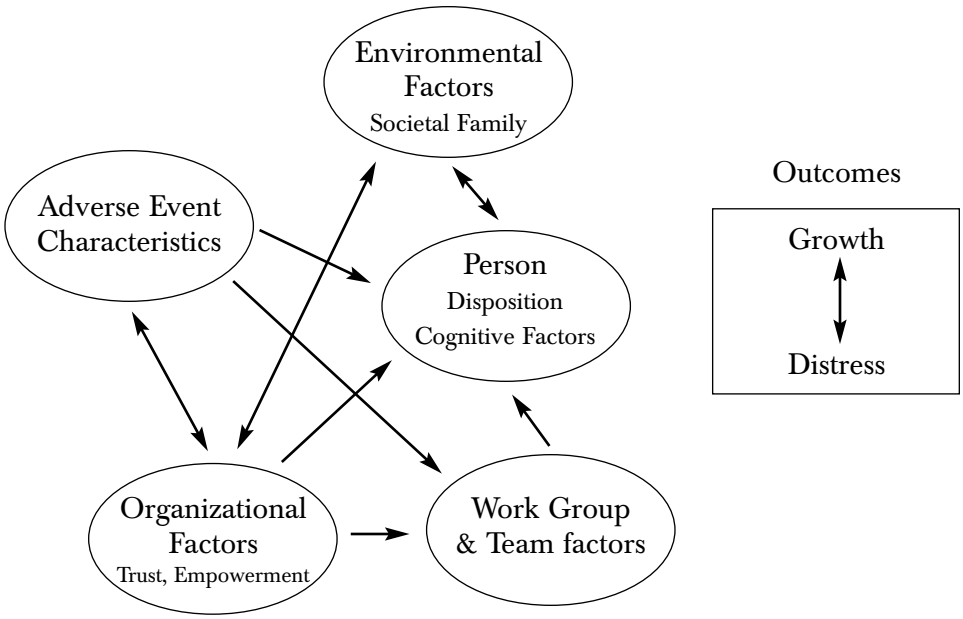

Figure 1.1. Adverse event characteristics interact with personal, group, and environmental resilience and vulnerability factors to influence growth and distress outcomes.

Although personality and cognitive factors have been readily accommodated within clinical models that tend to define traumatic stress reactions as resulting from the interaction between person and event, the possibility of organizational-level factors acting in a causal capacity has not enjoyed similar levels of attention in clinical models.

Recent work, however, is increasingly suggesting not only that the organizational environment can exercise a powerful influence on the manner in which emergencies and disasters are experienced, but it may be the most important. For example, Eränen, Millar, and Paton (1999) demonstrated that "perceptions of organizational climate" was the most important predictor of stress responses in search-and-rescue workers following the sinking of the Estonia ferry. Paton, Smith, Ramsay, and Akande (1999), following a multidimensional scaling analysis of the structural relationships between Impact of Event Scale items in firefighters, demonstrated that organizational characteristics superseded event characteristics as determinants of traumatic stress reactions. Paton (1994) described how workplace procedures affected resilience to adverse events in firefighters. Alexander and Wells (1991) concluded that a supportive managerial culture played a prominent role in facilitating resilience in police officers performing body recovery duties. Finally,