

**WORKING IN
HIGH RISK ENVIRONMENTS**

WORKING IN HIGH RISK ENVIRONMENTS

Developing Sustained Resilience

Edited by

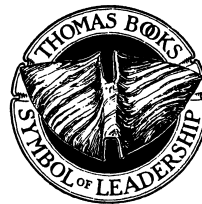
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PREFACE

The impact of events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina were felt across the spectrum of organizations. Such events provide vivid illustrations of the exceptional circumstances that emergency and protective service agencies and businesses alike can encounter. These events stretched capabilities to the breaking point and sometimes beyond. Agencies and businesses encountered and had to cope with and adapt problems on a scale that far exceeded anything that their “routine” experience would have prepared them for.

If they are to respond effectively, agencies and businesses need to develop their capacity to adapt to unpredictable and challenging circumstances. To do so, agencies, institutions, and businesses and their officers and employees must be resilient. The subject of this book is how this outcome can be facilitated.

It is also a goal of this book to broaden the perspectives on the populations that need to be included when thinking about high risk groups and from whom insights into resilience and how it is enacted can be sought. Caregivers and groups existing or working in isolated conditions are considered.

The past few years have witnessed considerable growth in research into adaptation and growth outcomes in high risk professions. However, if organizations are to benefit from this knowledge and a strong foundation for future research put down, a resource that systematically integrates this work and highlights its significant implications and how they can be used in organizations is required. The proposed book will do this.

—Douglas Paton and John M. Violanti

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**WORKING IN
HIGH RISK ENVIRONMENTS**

Chapter 1

HIGH RISK ENVIRONMENTS, SUSTAINED RESILIENCE, AND STRESS RISK MANAGEMENT

DOUGLAS PATON AND JOHN M. VIOLANTI

*How overcome this dire calamity,
What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not, what resolution from despair?*
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,
Book I, lines 189–191

INTRODUCTION

For many emergency and helping professionals, dire calamity is a fact of working life. Milton’s quote challenges us to consider the fact that people have within their grasp the potential to influence the consequences of their exposure to dire calamity. The potential to draw on hope in changing the consequences of experiencing calamity foreshadowed the more recent recognition of how strengths such as hope and optimism can promote well-being and adversarial growth in the face of adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Milton’s quote also points to the role that resolution plays as a precursor to learning from the experience of dire calamity.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* variously defines *resolution* as “separating into components,” “converting into other forms,” and “formulating intentions for virtuous intent.” The sentiments embodied in these definitions are echoed in the positive psychology and resilience

literatures with regard to securing salutogenic outcomes when faced with adversity. From the perspective of this book, the challenge posed by Milton's quote is to identify the beliefs (such as hope) and competencies (such as resolution) that can be pressed into service to turn the experience of calamity and despair into salutogenic outcomes in the form of resilience, adaptive capacity, and adversarial growth. The differences between the terms *resilience*, *adaptive capacity*, and *adversarial growth*, and the importance of distinguishing between them, is discussed in Chapter 9. But how are they related to risk?

RISK AND RESILIENCE

The search stimulated by taking up the challenge embodied in turning the essence of Milton's words into practical reality focuses on exploring two basic issues. The first concerns identifying what is meant by the risk posed by the dire calamities of everyday working and professional life. The second is about identifying how beliefs and competencies (e.g., hope and resolution) can ameliorate despair and facilitate a capacity to adapt in those for whom experience of dire calamity (e.g., critical incidents) is a fact of everyday life. In the contemporary traumatic stress and positive psychology literatures, characteristics such as hope and resolution are described by terms such as *strengths* or *resilience*. The title of this book alludes to their being a relationship between resilience and risk. The reason that a relationship between them can be discerned derives from how risk is defined.

Risk is the product of the likelihood of experiencing a challenging event and the consequences the event has for those who experience it (Hood & Jones, 1996). This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.1. The events that are the subject of the contents of this book are those capable of causing physical, social or psychological harm to those caught up in them (e.g., hazardous events like natural disasters, acts of terrorism and mass transportation accidents).

According to Figure 1.1, risk is first influenced by the likelihood or probability of the occurrence of dire calamity. In the main, the populations (e.g., helpers, helping professions, emergency, and protective services professions) whose experiences are the focus of this text cannot control the occurrence of potentially hazardous events. Emergency and helping professions cannot readily influence the frequency,



Figure 1.1. The relationship between risk and resilience.

timing, nature, duration, or location of the events they are called on to respond to. However, emergency and helping professions agencies can make choices about the consequences their members experience as a result of experiencing a hazardous or critical incident (Paton, Violanti, Burke, & Gherke, 2009).

To facilitate this process, this book first aims to build understanding of how the “consequences” component of the risk equation emerges from interaction between environmental demands and the personal, social, and organizational resources brought to bear to deal with these demands (Figure 1.1). Next, it seeks to articulate how these resources can be applied (e.g., through selection, training, support, and organizational change) to ensure that the experience of calamity and despair is characterized by salutary outcomes and the development of the future capacity of people and agencies.

Consequences of Experiencing Critical Incidents

The consequences of critical incident exposure result from the potential of the characteristics of hazardous events to cause harm to populations. However, experiencing harm is not inevitable. The implications of exposure to hazardous circumstances can be moderated by the presence of factors that increase susceptibility to experiencing loss from exposure to a hazard (i.e., that increase vulnerability) and those

that facilitate a capacity to cope and adapt or adjust (i.e., increase resilience and adaptive capacity) following exposure (Figure 1.1). Because many of the factors that influence vulnerability and resilience are amenable to change, this affords opportunities to manage risk.

Although typically associated with loss, risk also encompasses the concepts of choice, anticipation, and resilience (Dake, 1992; Hood & Jones, 1996). Dake pointed out that the contemporary tendency to conflate risk with loss is a relatively recent phenomenon. The term *risk* originally meant accounting for the gains and losses in games of chance. Returning to the original and more comprehensive conceptualization, the risk concept becomes a future-oriented concept and one capable of accommodating perspectives that cover adaptive and growth outcomes and not just those associated with loss and distress outcomes.

More important, from the perspective of the present book, the more comprehensive conceptualization of risk implies an ability to make choices (through, for example, selection, training, and support practices) regarding how people and agencies experience and interact with threatening events. In particular, it points to the potential for agencies to influence the likelihood of those caught up in such circumstances experiencing resilient and adaptive outcomes.

This more comprehensive definition of risk thus represents a suitable foundation for traumatic stress risk management in professions and groups that face threatening and challenging circumstances repeatedly in the course of exercising their professional roles and for whom the goal of risk management is to create the potential for the experience of salutary outcomes. Risk management policies can then be developed and appropriate practices and strategies implemented to facilitate salutary outcomes as well as minimize the risk of pathological outcomes.

The foundation on which the attainment of these objectives is based is risk analysis. A key element of risk analysis is the risk assessment processes that identify the hazardous conditions that people may have to contend with. Identifying the hazards, threats, and challenges that people may face is an essential prerequisite to identifying the personal and collective resources and competencies required to be resilient in the face of adversity. In this sense, the first step in the process of understanding sustained resilience is identifying the threatening and