

Resilience Reconsidered

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Written in consultation with Victoria Bilyeu, owner of Gyrotonic Solana Beach

Resilience is a measure of our coping elasticity, our ability to bounce back from adversity, acute stress, unexpected traumas and life's surprises. As psychologists, we are acutely aware of relative and varying degrees of resilience in ourselves, our family members, friends, colleagues and patients.

Resilience is a complicated construct because it encompasses not just cognitive flexibility and the ability to regulate our own emotional states but our bodily self as well. Our overall "elasticity" can be perceived in our body language. We observe this quality in our patients in intake interviews, and over the course of therapy, looking for indicators of healthy behavior change. It is well documented by the DSM, ICD-10 and numerous measures of anxiety and depression that these disorders are characterized by a compressing of the self, cognitively, emotionally and physically. People who have anxiety often feel constrained by the repetition of anxious thoughts, obsessions, compulsions or just plain worry. People who struggle with major depression experience a shrinking mental world characterized by social isolation and hopelessness wherein often, there is no emotional peripheral vision. Among the physiological correlates of these disorders are tight, tense muscles, gastrointestinal distress, fatigue, anergia, shortness of breath, and heart palpitations. Anxiety and depression often present together, like two sides of the same coin, at times compensating for each other. These sensations signal a loss or lack of homeostasis in our system. We feel off kilter, especially if we are not accustomed to feeling stressed. Recent neuroscience research validates this finding. Poor integration of some aspects of the self are correlated with psychopathology, and healthy integration of other aspects are correlated with psychological wellness. (Siegel, 2010)

Let me illustrate this last point with a first-person account.

I think of myself as a resilient person. But as I get older, I find that my mettle is tested by various facets of my daily life: 1) I am undergoing peri-menopause, 2) I have a teenager living at home, 3) my children still need me in various ways, whether to edit college essays or to strategize how to juggle academic loads, 4) I have friends who lean on me for social support, whether to process their difficulties finding a job or the recent cancer diagnosis of a family member, 5) I am available to family members who are aging, sick, grieving, to help shoulder their burdens. It is an interesting phase of life; there are many joys, and yet, a whole new set of challenges in terms of mood, sleep, irritability, pain symptoms and weariness.

Some of these challenges began presenting themselves a few years ago. I still recall vividly the words of my long-time gynecologist at the time: “Your days of restorative sleep are officially over. Start taking something for your mood and sleep and get a monthly massage...” I have been aware that I needed a new strategy to “fill up my tank,” as it were, since then, but I did not understand what that meant until one recent, serendipitous, ultimately transformative experience.

I am a rather adventurous person who leaves no stone unturned when visiting a place or on vacation. I have to check out everything! For instance, I am the kind of person who feels compelled to explore entire museums and read every descriptor board at an exhibit. This curiosity and zest for learning recently paid off in a huge way; I discovered a new way of being in my body that psychologically benefitted me in unique ways unmatched by any other practice or physical activity. In my effort to find a practice that would be energizing or restorative, I had tried yoga, Pilates, running, none of which have felt right for me. In fact, they often left me in pain or gastrointestinal distress.

Last February, while away on a vacation with my mom, the spa where we were staying was hosting Gyrokinesis week. I had never heard of Gyrokinesis, but curious and game to try new things as always, I jumped at the opportunity. My introductory class, comprised of 40 women, was led by Gina Muensterkoetter, a dynamic and gifted instructor who happened to be the partner of Juliu Horvath, the founder of Gyrokinesis. It may sound hyperbolic (and certainly out of character for me), but I experienced this woman as akin to an actual, living goddess. As she led us through 75 minutes of undulating, fluid, dance-based body movements that used the spine and sternum to lead the rest of the body, I felt myself becoming increasingly energized and balanced, while also free and restored. I left the class with a tremendous sense of release and felt six inches taller, an extraordinary, unexpected experience. Gina explained that gyrokinesis creates energy rather than expending it as with traditional aerobic exercise. I attended the class every day for a week and could palpably feel the shift in my body. I felt elongated, energized and renewed. In fact, I was likely radiating these sensations outwardly because Gina seemed to sense it; she remarked that energy was almost overwhelming. Her feedback was tremendously validating.

Eager to continue Gyrokinesis on a routine basis, I found Victoria Bilyeu, owner of Solana Beach Gyrotonic, close to where I live. We connected instantly and found that we shared similar philosophies about healthcare and healing even though we had been trained in very different traditions and modalities. I have been working with her since March, and my body has been in better shape these past few months than it has been in recent years. This practice also has improved my overall resilience in coping with increased work demands and ubiquitous parenting challenges. I also am more available to my friends and family who lean on me, and I can be supportive without it becoming an emotional burden. According to Victoria: “Pain is similar to a riptide, and doing Gyrotonic is like paddling on top of the crest of the wave to ride through and release it...”

it's the only [exercise] modality out there that makes your body better with age or time spent [doing it]." I hope you are as intrigued as I was and continue to be.

So, what is Gyrokinesis? Gyrotonic and Gyrokinesis are related methods that were invented by Juliu Horvath, a former professional ballet dancer, in an effort to heal himself after debilitating dance-related injuries. Gyrotonic utilizes versatile equipment to restore balance and agility, but with more intensity than Gyrokinesis. According to an interview with Gina Muensterkoetter, gyrokinesis and gyrotonic focus on circular and spiraling movements which mirror cellular and underlying joint patterns of figure eights. The theory behind these methods is that the parallel movements create connections that help to restore and balance the body. Horvath's philosophy is predicated on training to be one's own teacher solely through learning to be with one's own body. Much of the focus is on connecting with oneself and with others in the process. That connection was palpable in the room with Gina as I can attest to firsthand.

As a health and gero-psychologist who is trained to study and observe the mind-body relationship, this practice and experience was transformative for me. I had found a partial solution to my peri-menopausal experiences that had in turn, challenged my resilience. For me, the most dramatic element of the practice is the way it is focused on releasing joints, muscles, and the spine. We spend a lot of time in psychotherapy discussing cognitive strategies for restructuring our thoughts, processing our feelings, trying to understand why we do things and how to effect change. But we don't do a lot with movement other than diaphragmatic breathing or body scans, even in behavioral medicine which highlights mind-body relationships in theory and practice. I have found Gyrotonic and Gyrokinesis to be potent strategies for decompressing stress. The releasing aspect of the Gyrotonic expansion program seems to be a fitting antidote to the compression associated with life stressors, chronic anxiety, and depression.

Other people see mental health professionals as helpers, caregivers, problem—solvers because of what we do and our role in the world as healers; I often find that others look to me for advice, guidance, and direction, and often, as an empathic shoulder to lean on. My current job includes outpatient psychotherapy and supervision of graduate students, but also on-call work for the ER and hospital floor consults. These multiple demands sometimes are overly taxing for me emotionally and cognitively, not to mention physically. In sharing my experience with other women in healthcare professions, it seems that my experience is not unique. So, the question becomes a matter of how we manage or maintain our resilience over time. We as psychologists learn early on that we have to prophylactically take care of our emotional selves, develop professional boundaries, find ways to recharge our emotional batteries when we feel depleted and develop routine self-care routines. We strive to be competent, efficacious role models to our patients, students, children and colleagues. It seems to me that these tasks and responsibilities can be difficult to uphold over time, or need rethinking when the usual self-care regimen no longer suffices. Routines and habits are adaptive, but so is cognitive flexibility. I tell my patients that they can heal from the inside out or the outside in. Having found a new modality for

myself delivers a sense of renewal and strengthens this belief. In this vein, I encourage you to re-evaluate your methods of self-care and personal restoration, to seek integration of your own system, to open yourself up to new experiences and opportunities for learning, growing and building resilience.

You can check out Gyrotonic/Gyrokinesis on line at www.gyrotonic.com or on YouTube. There are a handful of Gyrotonic studios in San Diego county. I encourage you to try a class or go for a consultation if you are at all interested or are looking for a new resilience building tool.