



Resilience Across the Lifespan: Conceptual Developments, Protective Factors, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Resilience has emerged as one of the most influential constructs in contemporary psychology, reflecting the capacity of individuals to adapt successfully despite adversity, stress, and life challenges. Originally conceptualized as an exceptional quality possessed by a select group of individuals, resilience is now understood as a dynamic developmental process shaped by interactions between personal characteristics, social relationships, and environmental resources. The growing interest in resilience research reflects its relevance to mental health promotion, prevention of psychopathology, and enhancement of well-being across the lifespan. The present review examines the conceptual evolution of resilience, explores major protective factors associated with resilient functioning, and discusses resilience across different developmental stages including childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and later adulthood. The review further highlights the role of resilience within positive psychology and mental health frameworks while identifying important gaps and future directions in resilience research. Existing evidence suggests that resilience is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, social support, family functioning, optimism, and coping skills. Furthermore, resilience appears to contribute significantly to psychological well-being, adaptive functioning, and successful adjustment throughout life. The review concludes that resilience represents a critical target for intervention and mental health promotion efforts and emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive and longitudinal investigations, particularly within developing countries such as India.

Keywords: Resilience, Lifespan Development, Mental Health, Protective Factors, Adaptation, Positive Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to adapt successfully to adversity has fascinated psychologists, educators, and mental health professionals for decades. Individuals frequently encounter challenges such as personal loss, academic pressures, financial difficulties, illness, trauma, and social disruptions. While some experience significant psychological impairment under such circumstances, others demonstrate remarkable adaptability and continue to function effectively despite adversity. This capacity for positive adaptation has become the focus of resilience research.

Resilience is widely regarded as one of the most significant constructs within contemporary developmental and positive psychology. It encompasses the processes through which individuals maintain or regain psychological well-being when confronted with stress, adversity, or traumatic experiences. The concept has evolved considerably over time, moving from trait-



based explanations to more dynamic and ecological perspectives that emphasize interactions among individual, family, community, and societal factors.

The increasing prominence of resilience research is closely linked to changing perspectives within psychology. Earlier approaches focused predominantly on psychopathology and risk factors. However, the emergence of positive psychology encouraged greater attention to human strengths, adaptive capacities, and factors that promote well-being. Within this framework, resilience became a central construct because it provides insight into how individuals overcome challenges and achieve positive outcomes despite difficult circumstances.

Research has demonstrated that resilience contributes to mental health across all stages of life. During childhood, resilience supports healthy emotional and social development despite environmental risks. In adolescence, it facilitates identity formation, academic adjustment, and emotional regulation. During young adulthood, resilience assists individuals in navigating educational, occupational, and interpersonal transitions. In later adulthood, resilience contributes to adaptation in response to aging, health challenges, and life changes.

Importantly, contemporary researchers no longer regard resilience as a fixed personality trait. Instead, resilience is understood as a multidimensional process shaped by protective factors operating at multiple levels. Individual strengths such as optimism, self-efficacy, emotional competence, and coping skills interact with social support systems, family relationships, educational opportunities, and cultural resources to foster resilience.

Given the growing importance of resilience in mental health promotion and psychological well-being, a comprehensive understanding of its development across the lifespan is essential. The present review therefore examines the conceptual evolution of resilience, explores key protective factors associated with resilient functioning, discusses resilience across developmental stages, and identifies future directions for resilience research and intervention.

2. EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE

The concept of resilience has undergone significant transformation since its emergence within developmental psychology during the latter half of the twentieth century. Early resilience research sought to understand why some individuals exposed to severe adversity developed normally while others experienced substantial psychological difficulties. Initial investigations focused primarily on identifying personal characteristics that distinguished resilient individuals from their less adaptive counterparts. Consequently, resilience was initially conceptualized as a relatively stable personality trait that enabled successful adaptation despite adverse circumstances.

Early trait-based perspectives emphasized characteristics such as intelligence, self-confidence, perseverance, autonomy, and emotional stability. Researchers believed that resilient individuals possessed inherent qualities that protected them from the negative consequences of stress and adversity. Although these perspectives contributed valuable insights, they were criticized for oversimplifying resilience and failing to account for environmental influences.

As resilience research expanded, scholars increasingly recognized that resilience could not be adequately explained by individual traits alone. This realization contributed to the emergence of process-oriented approaches, which conceptualized resilience as a dynamic interaction



between individuals and their environments. Rather than viewing resilience as something people possess, researchers began to understand resilience as something people develop through adaptive interactions with their surroundings.

Bonanno (2004) played an important role in reshaping resilience theory by demonstrating that resilience is a common response to adversity rather than an exceptional phenomenon. His work challenged assumptions that exposure to trauma inevitably results in psychopathology. Instead, Bonanno proposed that many individuals naturally maintain stable psychological functioning following stressful life events. This perspective shifted attention away from pathology and toward adaptive capacities inherent in human functioning.

Another influential contribution emerged from the work of Connor and Davidson (2003), who conceptualized resilience as the ability to cope successfully with stress and adversity. Their development of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) facilitated empirical research by providing a standardized measure of resilience. The scale identified several dimensions of resilience, including adaptability, personal competence, tolerance of negative emotions, and perceived control. The widespread use of the CD-RISC significantly advanced resilience research across clinical and non-clinical populations.

Masten (2013) further transformed resilience theory by introducing the concept of “ordinary magic.” According to Masten, resilience does not arise from extraordinary abilities but from ordinary adaptive systems that support healthy development. These systems include secure relationships, effective parenting, cognitive competencies, emotional regulation, and community support. This perspective emphasized that resilience is accessible to most individuals when adequate resources and support systems are available.

Contemporary resilience research increasingly adopts ecological and systems-based approaches. These perspectives recognize that resilience emerges from interactions among multiple levels of influence, including individual, family, community, cultural, and societal factors. Ecological models emphasize that resilience cannot be fully understood without considering the contexts within which individuals live and develop.

Ayed, Toner, and Priebe (2019) further highlighted the complexity of resilience by identifying multiple conceptualizations within the adult mental health literature. Their review revealed that resilience has been variously understood as resistance to disruption, recovery following adversity, personal growth after challenges, and the mobilization of protective resources. Such findings demonstrate that resilience is a multifaceted construct that cannot be reduced to a single definition.

Today, resilience is widely regarded as a dynamic developmental process involving positive adaptation despite adversity. It encompasses not only recovery from difficulties but also growth, transformation, and enhanced functioning following challenging experiences. This broader understanding has expanded the relevance of resilience across psychology, education, healthcare, and public policy, making it one of the most influential constructs in contemporary mental health research.

3. PROTECTIVE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH RESILIENCE

A central objective of resilience research has been the identification of factors that promote successful adaptation despite adversity. Contemporary evidence suggests that resilience is influenced by a diverse range of protective factors operating at individual, interpersonal, and environmental levels. These factors interact dynamically to support psychological well-being and reduce vulnerability to mental health difficulties.

Among individual-level protective factors, optimism has received considerable attention. Optimistic individuals tend to view challenges as temporary and manageable rather than overwhelming or permanent. Such positive expectations facilitate adaptive coping and enhance motivation when confronting stressful situations. Optimism has consistently been associated with greater resilience and improved psychological adjustment across diverse populations.

Self-efficacy also represents a significant contributor to resilience. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to manage challenges and achieve desired outcomes. Individuals with strong self-efficacy are more likely to approach difficulties confidently, persist when confronted with obstacles, and utilize effective problem-solving strategies. These characteristics contribute substantially to resilient functioning.

Emotional regulation is another key protective factor. The ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions enables individuals to respond adaptively to stress and adversity. Emotional regulation reduces impulsive reactions, facilitates cognitive flexibility, and supports effective decision-making during challenging circumstances. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals with strong emotional regulation skills exhibit higher levels of resilience and psychological well-being.

Coping strategies similarly play a crucial role in resilience development. Adaptive coping approaches such as problem-solving, seeking social support, positive reframing, and acceptance contribute to resilience by enabling individuals to manage stress effectively. Campbell-Sills et al. (2006) reported that resilient individuals were more likely to engage in constructive coping behaviors and less likely to rely on avoidance or maladaptive responses. Such findings suggest that coping skills constitute an important mechanism through which resilience influences mental health outcomes.

Positive emotions have also been identified as significant protective factors. Gloria and Steinhardt (2016) demonstrated that positive emotions contribute to resilience by broadening cognitive resources and facilitating adaptive coping. Individuals experiencing positive emotions are more likely to demonstrate creativity, flexibility, and openness when addressing challenges. These qualities enhance their ability to recover from setbacks and maintain psychological well-being.

Social support represents one of the most consistently identified environmental protective factors associated with resilience. Supportive relationships provide emotional comfort, practical assistance, guidance, and opportunities for meaningful connection. Family members, peers, mentors, educators, and community networks can all contribute to resilience by creating environments that foster security, belonging, and encouragement.



Family functioning is particularly important during childhood and adolescence. Supportive parenting practices, secure attachments, effective communication, and emotional warmth promote resilience by helping individuals develop confidence, emotional competence, and coping abilities. Research consistently demonstrates that positive family environments serve as powerful buffers against adversity.

Educational institutions also contribute significantly to resilience development. Schools and universities provide opportunities for skill development, social engagement, mentorship, and personal growth. Positive educational experiences can strengthen self-esteem, competence, and adaptive coping, thereby enhancing resilience among students.

At the community level, access to resources, social cohesion, cultural values, and opportunities for participation contribute to resilient functioning. Communities that promote inclusion, support, and collective efficacy create environments that facilitate adaptation and psychological well-being. Ecological perspectives emphasize that resilience emerges not only from individual strengths but also from supportive social contexts.

Collectively, the literature indicates that resilience is shaped by multiple interacting protective factors operating across different levels of human experience. Individual attributes such as optimism, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy interact with supportive relationships, educational opportunities, family environments, and community resources to promote positive adaptation throughout life. Understanding these protective factors is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at strengthening resilience and enhancing mental health across the lifespan.

4. RESILIENCE ACROSS DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Resilience is not a static phenomenon that emerges at a particular point in life. Rather, it is a developmental process that evolves through interactions between individuals and their environments across the lifespan. Although the fundamental purpose of resilience remains the same—facilitating positive adaptation despite adversity—the factors that contribute to resilience and the challenges requiring resilience vary considerably across developmental stages. Understanding these variations is essential for developing age-appropriate interventions and promoting mental health throughout life.

5. CHILDHOOD

Childhood represents one of the most critical periods for the development of resilience. During this stage, children depend heavily upon caregivers, family environments, and educational settings to meet their emotional, cognitive, and social needs. Consequently, the quality of these environments significantly influences resilience development.

Research suggests that supportive family relationships serve as one of the strongest protective factors during childhood. Secure attachment relationships provide children with a sense of safety, trust, and emotional security that supports healthy psychological development. Children who experience warmth, responsiveness, and consistent caregiving are generally better equipped to cope with stress and adversity.



Masten (2013) emphasized that resilience during childhood often emerges through ordinary developmental systems, including positive parent-child relationships, effective schools, and supportive communities. These systems promote emotional regulation, problem-solving abilities, and social competence, all of which contribute to resilient functioning.

Educational environments also play a crucial role. Positive relationships with teachers and peers can provide children with encouragement, emotional support, and opportunities to develop confidence and competence. Such experiences foster adaptive coping and help children navigate challenges successfully.

Importantly, resilience in childhood does not imply immunity from stress. Rather, resilient children are those who continue to demonstrate positive developmental outcomes despite exposure to risk factors such as poverty, family conflict, illness, or social disadvantage. Early resilience development establishes a foundation for adaptive functioning later in life.

6. ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. During this period, individuals encounter new challenges related to identity formation, peer relationships, academic expectations, and increasing independence. These developmental transitions create both opportunities and vulnerabilities that influence resilience.

One of the defining tasks of adolescence is the development of a coherent sense of identity. Successfully navigating identity-related challenges contributes to self-confidence, self-efficacy, and emotional stability, all of which support resilience. Adolescents who develop a positive sense of self are generally better able to cope with stress and adversity.

Peer relationships become increasingly influential during adolescence. Supportive friendships provide emotional validation, social belonging, and opportunities for skill development. Positive peer interactions can strengthen resilience by helping adolescents manage stress and develop adaptive coping strategies.

Connor and Slear (2009) highlighted the importance of emotional competencies in adolescent resilience. Their findings suggest that individuals who effectively understand and manage emotions demonstrate greater adaptability and resilience. Emotional awareness and regulation become particularly important during adolescence because of heightened emotional intensity and social complexity.

Educational experiences also contribute significantly to resilience during adolescence. Schools provide opportunities for achievement, social engagement, and personal growth. Academic success can enhance self-esteem and competence, while supportive educational environments can buffer the negative effects of stress and adversity.

Despite the challenges associated with adolescence, this developmental period offers substantial opportunities for resilience development. Successfully overcoming difficulties during adolescence can strengthen adaptive capacities that continue to benefit individuals throughout adulthood.

7. YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Young adulthood is often characterized by significant life transitions involving higher education, employment, financial independence, intimate relationships, and career

development. These experiences require individuals to adapt to new responsibilities and navigate increasing levels of uncertainty.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood can be both exciting and stressful. Young adults frequently encounter academic pressures, occupational challenges, economic concerns, and relationship difficulties that place substantial demands on psychological resources. Consequently, resilience becomes particularly important during this stage.

Research consistently demonstrates that resilience contributes to successful adjustment among young adults. Resilient individuals are more likely to utilize adaptive coping strategies, maintain positive mental health, and effectively manage stress. They also tend to demonstrate greater optimism, emotional regulation, and psychological flexibility when confronted with challenges.

Burns, Anstey, and Windsor (2011) found that resilience contributed significantly to subjective well-being and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression among young and middle-aged adults. Their findings suggest that resilience functions as a protective factor that supports psychological adjustment during periods of transition and uncertainty.

Young adulthood is also a period of increasing autonomy and self-determination. Individuals must make important decisions regarding education, employment, relationships, and future goals. Resilience supports effective decision-making by promoting confidence, adaptability, and persistence in the face of obstacles.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of resilience among young adults. Disruptions to education, employment, and social relationships created substantial psychological challenges. Studies conducted during this period consistently identified resilience as a key factor associated with positive mental health outcomes and successful adaptation.

Adulthood and Later Life

Resilience continues to play an important role throughout adulthood and later life. Adults encounter numerous challenges including occupational stress, family responsibilities, caregiving demands, financial pressures, health concerns, and major life transitions. Successful adaptation to these experiences requires ongoing resilience.

Unlike earlier developmental stages, resilience in adulthood often reflects the accumulation of life experiences and coping resources developed over time. Adults frequently draw upon previous experiences, social networks, and established problem-solving abilities when confronting adversity.

Bonanno (2004) emphasized that many adults demonstrate remarkable resilience following potentially traumatic events such as bereavement, illness, or significant life disruptions. Rather than experiencing long-term dysfunction, many individuals maintain stable functioning or recover relatively quickly after adversity.

In later life, resilience becomes particularly important in relation to aging, retirement, physical health challenges, and changing social roles. Older adults often face losses involving health, independence, or significant relationships. Nevertheless, many continue to demonstrate resilience through adaptive coping, acceptance, emotional regulation, and social engagement.

Research suggests that resilience in later life is associated with greater life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and successful aging. Supportive relationships, positive coping strategies, optimism, and meaning-making processes contribute significantly to resilience among older adults.

Overall, resilience remains a vital developmental resource throughout life. Although the specific challenges and protective factors vary across developmental stages, the capacity to adapt positively despite adversity continues to support mental health, well-being, and successful functioning from childhood through later adulthood.

8. RESILIENCE IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH

The emergence of positive psychology significantly transformed the way mental health and human functioning are understood. Traditionally, psychological research focused primarily on pathology, dysfunction, and the treatment of mental illness. While such approaches remain essential, positive psychology shifted attention toward strengths, virtues, and adaptive capacities that enable individuals to thrive despite challenges. Within this framework, resilience has become one of the most extensively studied and influential constructs.

Positive psychology emphasizes not merely the absence of mental illness but the presence of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, personal growth, and optimal functioning. Resilience aligns closely with these objectives because it reflects an individual's capacity to adapt successfully to adversity while maintaining psychological health. Rather than viewing stress and challenges solely as threats, resilience-oriented perspectives recognize them as opportunities for learning, growth, and development.

Research consistently demonstrates that resilience contributes positively to mental health outcomes. Individuals with higher levels of resilience generally report lower levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Simultaneously, they tend to experience greater life satisfaction, emotional well-being, optimism, and subjective happiness. These findings suggest that resilience functions not only as a protective factor against mental illness but also as a promoter of positive psychological functioning.

Gloria and Steinhardt (2016) found significant relationships among positive emotions, coping, resilience, and mental health. Their findings indicate that positive emotions facilitate adaptive coping processes and contribute to resilience, which in turn supports psychological well-being. This relationship is consistent with positive psychology theories suggesting that positive emotions broaden cognitive resources and enhance adaptive functioning.

Similarly, Burns et al. (2011) reported that resilience contributed significantly to subjective well-being and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression. Their findings support the notion that resilience influences mental health through both protective and promotive pathways. Individuals who possess resilience are not only less vulnerable to distress but are also more likely to experience positive psychological states.

The relationship between resilience and mental health is particularly important in contemporary society, where increasing rates of stress, anxiety, and emotional difficulties have become significant public health concerns. Educational institutions, workplaces, and healthcare

systems increasingly recognize resilience as an essential component of mental health promotion. Programs designed to enhance coping skills, emotional regulation, optimism, and social support frequently incorporate resilience-building strategies as central components. Furthermore, resilience contributes to psychological flourishing by fostering adaptive responses to life's inevitable challenges. Individuals who demonstrate resilience are more likely to perceive difficulties as manageable, maintain hope during adversity, and recover effectively following setbacks. These qualities support long-term well-being and facilitate successful functioning across diverse life domains.

From a positive psychology perspective, resilience therefore represents far more than resistance to adversity. It reflects the capacity to grow, adapt, and thrive despite challenges. This broader understanding positions resilience as a critical resource for promoting mental health and enhancing quality of life throughout the lifespan.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESILIENCE RESEARCH

Despite substantial advances in resilience research, several important gaps remain. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of resilience and enhance the effectiveness of resilience-based interventions.

One major limitation of existing research concerns the predominance of cross-sectional study designs. While cross-sectional studies provide valuable insights into relationships among variables, they are limited in their ability to explain developmental processes and causal pathways. Future research should prioritize longitudinal investigations that examine how resilience develops, changes, and influences outcomes across different stages of life.

Another important area for future exploration involves cultural perspectives on resilience. Much of the existing resilience literature originates from Western countries and may not fully capture resilience processes within diverse cultural contexts. Cultural values, family structures, community relationships, spiritual beliefs, and social norms can significantly influence resilience development. Consequently, culturally sensitive research is necessary to understand how resilience operates across different societies.

The Indian context offers particularly important opportunities for resilience research. India is characterized by considerable social, economic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Young people frequently navigate complex educational pressures, career uncertainties, family expectations, and social transitions. Despite these realities, resilience among Indian populations remains relatively underexplored. Future studies should examine culturally specific protective factors that contribute to resilience within Indian communities.

Another promising direction involves investigating resilience through ecological and systems-based frameworks. Contemporary theories emphasize that resilience emerges through interactions among individuals, families, schools, communities, and broader social systems. Future research should therefore move beyond individual-level analyses and explore how environmental resources contribute to resilient functioning.

Technological developments also present new opportunities for resilience research and intervention. Digital mental health platforms, mobile applications, online counseling services, and virtual resilience-training programs may increase accessibility to resilience-enhancing

interventions. Evaluating the effectiveness of such approaches represents an important area for future investigation.

Finally, resilience research would benefit from greater methodological diversity. Qualitative and mixed-method studies can provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of resilience and illuminate processes that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone. Such approaches are particularly valuable for understanding resilience within culturally diverse populations.

Overall, future resilience research should adopt longitudinal, culturally sensitive, ecological, and interdisciplinary approaches to advance knowledge and improve mental health promotion efforts across the lifespan.

10. DISCUSSION

The present review examined resilience across the lifespan, focusing on its conceptual evolution, protective factors, developmental manifestations, and implications for mental health. The literature consistently demonstrates that resilience is a dynamic and multidimensional process that enables individuals to adapt positively despite adversity.

One of the most significant developments in resilience research has been the transition from trait-based explanations to process-oriented and ecological perspectives. Contemporary theories emphasize that resilience emerges through interactions among personal characteristics, supportive relationships, and environmental resources. This shift has expanded the understanding of resilience and highlighted its relevance across developmental stages.

The review further identified numerous protective factors associated with resilience, including optimism, emotional regulation, coping skills, self-efficacy, social support, and positive family relationships. These factors operate together to promote adaptive functioning and psychological well-being. Importantly, resilience is influenced not only by individual strengths but also by broader social and environmental contexts.

A lifespan perspective reveals that resilience remains relevant throughout life, although its developmental manifestations vary across stages. Childhood resilience is strongly influenced by family and educational environments, while adolescence emphasizes identity development and peer relationships. During young adulthood, resilience facilitates adaptation to educational, occupational, and interpersonal transitions. In later adulthood, resilience supports successful aging and adaptation to health-related and social challenges.

The review also highlights the close relationship between resilience and positive mental health. Beyond protecting against psychological distress, resilience contributes to flourishing, well-being, and successful adaptation. Consequently, resilience represents a valuable target for preventive and promotive mental health interventions.

11. CONCLUSION

Resilience has emerged as one of the most important constructs in contemporary psychology, offering valuable insights into how individuals adapt successfully despite adversity. The evolution of resilience research has transformed understanding from a narrow focus on personality traits to a broader appreciation of dynamic developmental processes influenced by multiple interacting systems.

Evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that resilience is shaped by numerous protective factors, including optimism, emotional regulation, coping skills, social support, and positive environmental resources. These factors contribute to adaptive functioning and psychological well-being throughout life. Importantly, resilience remains relevant across all developmental stages, supporting successful adaptation from childhood through later adulthood.

The growing emphasis on resilience within positive psychology and mental health promotion reflects its significance for both preventing psychological difficulties and enhancing well-being. As societies continue to face complex social, economic, and health-related challenges, understanding and fostering resilience becomes increasingly important.

Future research should prioritize culturally sensitive, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary approaches that capture the complexity of resilience across diverse populations. Such efforts will contribute to the development of effective interventions and policies aimed at strengthening resilience and promoting mental health across the lifespan.

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