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Hazards 123, July-September 2013

Resilience: A case of pointing the finger and missing the point



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A new resilience industry is invading the workplace, with a mission to make feeble workers 'man-up' and shrug off the stresses and strains of work. TUC head of safety Hugh Robertson says he isn't impressed with an approach that wants workers to be more resilient rather than workplaces more healthy.

Can you imagine opening a newspaper and seeing a report from the food industry claiming that, according to scientific evidence, it was no longer necessary to worry about food hygiene as the real problem was the customers? They were just becoming sick too easily and what we needed to do was learn how to cope with the effects better so that we did not feel so sick after we ate food that had been contaminated by E Coli, salmonella and other infections.

My guess is that you would not be very impressed. Well, that is what we are now seeing with workplace stress. A new industry is developing which aims to help us cope better with stress and, not surprising, human resource professionals are lapping it up.

This new approach is called “resilience” and it is fast becoming a buzz-word among managers. Consultants are promoting packages aimed at improving our resilience. Even professional bodies like CIPD which represents personnel staff and IOSH, the UK body for health and safety professionals, are promoting it.

What’s it all about?

Resilience is based on the premise we can be helped to bounce back from adversity or change; we just need to develop our ability to cope better with the demands made of us.

Many of the consultants who develop resilience programmes for employers quote the philosopher Nietzsche: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Which if you think about it is clearly not true. I could be hit by a bus tomorrow, break my neck and spend the rest of my life unable to move. I doubt if I would be “stronger”. Rather than building my resilience to being hit by a bus by practising on smaller traffic like a bike and then a car, I might be better learning how to look out for traffic before I cross the road.

Employers love concepts like resilience because they are less challenging than

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Stress
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It is important that trade unions ensure that their employer supports those who are ill because of stress. [\[more\]](#)

preventing stress. Workers sometimes like them because their employer appears to be doing something. It is another component of the well-being agenda used by some employers as an alternative to preventing injury and ill-health by removing and controlling risk (*Hazards 121*).

The 'science' behind resilience is based on research in the 1970s on how children cope with adversity, where a small 'resilient' group don't go off the rails and thrive in later life.¹ Later, a US scientist looked at children in a poor area of Hawaii. Of the children who grew up in poverty, two-thirds exhibited problem behaviours in adolescence such as crime and drug use but one-third did not. This latter group was labelled 'resilient'.²

In fact most of the evidence on resilience is based on children coping with poverty, change or family problems. What this research really shows is that, rather than being resilient, most children are seriously damaged by poverty and violence. The research anyway does not necessarily transfer to adults. Children are much more adaptable than adults. Once we are grown up our personalities are much more fixed.

We all have different coping mechanisms and may react differently to stress. Many employers have exploited that by seeking to recruit people who they think will be better able to cope. They deliberately promote a macho and competitive culture and their recruitment process seeks to identify people who will respond best in that environment. Those who react badly by becoming depressed or anxious are portrayed as having an "eggshell personality" or simply being weak.

That's really tough

In reality, there are very few people who will not be made ill in the long run by stress being piled on them. The answer is not to recruit the "right" staff or to improve their resilience, it is to assess the risk of stress and then manage it.

Resilience is looking at completely the wrong solution to the problem. We do not want to see workers moulded into robots that can 'bounce back' regardless of what is thrown at them. We want to see workers protected by their employer, reducing and managing the stress that they face.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) stress management standards are a positive step towards this. Unfortunately, despite evidence that managing stress can be effective in preventing illness,³ there is no real enforcement action against employers who do nothing to manage stress or who make their workers ill. In fact the government is doing all it can to reduce enforcement action by stopping the HSE and local councils from inspecting those premises that it deems “low risk” such as schools and offices, despite overwhelming evidence that these are often those with the highest stress levels.

According to the HSE, the highest levels of stress are in health, social work, education and public administration.⁴ These are amongst the sectors where the government has banned proactive inspections (*Hazards 120*). Because there are no sanctions against them, managers are likely to resist taking serious action to reduce stress as this may involve reducing workload or working hours, or changing how they manage staff.

The main work activities blamed for causing work-related stress, or making it worse, are work pressure, lack of managerial support and work-related violence and bullying. Because employers will put these problems in the ‘too difficult’ – really, too expensive - box they prefer to manage the symptoms. That is where resilience comes in.

A whole lot of hokum

Resilience aims to improve the ability to react to stress. One of the aims of resilience that makes it so attractive to managers, is to try to ensure that people can work in more stressful conditions without becoming ill.

This is completely against the principles of prevention that say that first of all you remove the hazard or reduce the risk. Given that stress is a hazard covered by the Health and Safety at Work Act, just the same as a dangerous chemical or an unguarded machine, it should be treated no differently by either employers or enforcing agencies. Despite this we still have people selling resilience as the answer to stress in the workplace.

It is not the first time we have been here. Where there is a problem there will be a consultant with a solution. In the 1990s there was a whole industry developed around

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) which was seen as the answer to workplace problems around motivation and performance. Private companies, local councils and even government departments spent fortunes sending their staff on NLP workshops. There was no evidence this had any real benefit to either the employers or the workers. When researchers actually looked for the evidence, it became clear it was all hokum. Now NLP is largely discredited.

Resilience is a bit different because it is actually a mix of different types of interventions, some of which may have a use. I can find no evidence, however, that it is possible to make people more 'resilient' to stress in the workplace, although I can find lots of evidence that prevention helps stop people becoming ill as a result of stress.⁵

There is some evidence that interventions can help people recover from stress better, by changing how they respond to some stressors.⁶ A lot of workers have benefited from treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) after suffering from anxiety or depression, and unions have always encouraged employers to see such treatments as an important part of a person's rehabilitation.

Much of what is being packaged as 'resilience' is nothing of the kind. Often it focuses on stress management or rehabilitation. It is common to see material being branded as 'resilience', this season's fave fad, despite the main focus being around the HSE management standards. A lot of management courses and leadership courses are also being rebranded as 'resilience training' without much change in the content. It is more a marketing tool than a real change, with people trying to jump on the latest bandwagon.

Just because something is being sold as resilience does not automatically make it useless, nor are those companies offering the training necessarily trying to stop employers focusing on prevention. However, as with the well-being agenda, that is often the result.

Coping with resilience

It is becoming increasingly difficult for trade unionists to keep the attention of

employers focused on prevention when these employers are being bombarded with “experts” who are telling them that their problem is the lack of resilience in their workers and that this can be fixed by training managers, or their workers.

It is also hard to tell what is useful and what is nonsense amongst the packages offered by the resilience industry. Consultants will often use the same phrases as you see in well-being initiatives or else wrap it up in management-speak. Like much of the well-being agenda, resilience focuses on the individual and sees them as the problem. So it tries to change the person rather than addressing the real problem, which is of course, the stress.

The bottom line is that if there is a problem with stress in the workplace change the workplace – not the worker.

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**Stressing support
A safety rep checklist**

It is important that trade unions ensure that their employer

supports those who are ill because of stress.

- If a worker is suffering from anxiety or depression they should be referred to an occupational health physician to see if they may benefit from some form of treatment.
- If the stress is related to work the employer must ensure that the stress is removed before the worker returns and that the worker is aware of what action is being taken.
- Where a worker has an illness that may be due to work-related stress the employer should always review all work in that section to make sure that other workers are not under stress.

Don't wait for workers to become ill

- Survey your members to find out if there is a problem with stress. This can be done jointly with management.
- Ensure that risk assessments include the risk of stress, and that management have taken effective action to reduce and manage any risk.

Stress – the facts

- Stress is the biggest cause of work-related illness. According to government statistics, 428,000 people reported suffering from work-related stress in 2011/12. This was 40 per cent of all work-related illness cases.
- Stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 10,400,000 days lost due to sickness absence.
- The average days lost per case for stress, depression or anxiety was 24 days.
- Only 293 people received compensation for work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2011/12 (*Hazards 122*).



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