



EMBODIED RESILIENCE

Resilience is our way of bouncing back after difficult, oppressive and/or traumatic experiences. It's part of how we live through very hard moments or times, and what can fuel happiness, connection and wellbeing. It's what keeps hope alive, gives us strength, and lets us thrive. Somatically we see resilience as our ability to shift ourselves from traumatic, hyper-alert reaction —always looking for what's wrong, feeling afraid and stressed— to a calmed and re-connected way of being. **Resilience brings back a positive imagination for the future and lets us re-establish both safety and connection.**

We are resilient and creative people. Our communities are resilient and creative. There are practices that can help us build resilience for ourselves, those we love, our organizations and our communities. We can cultivate resilience. **Resilience keeps inviting us toward strength, possibility, and healing.**

Research on Resilience

Many psychologists, neuroscientists, and trauma specialists are actively studying resilience in the face of trauma. Some of what the research on resilience says:

Children Who Witnessed Trauma or Violence:

Alicia Lieberman, Ph.D. studied the brain development of children under 6-years-old who witnessed trauma or violence. The major ways these young people were able to “work around” those places in the brain most impacted by witnessing trauma, were by being connected to one or more of the following:

- Spirituality
- Animals
- Nature
- Creativity

(Alicia Lieberman is the Director of the Child Trauma Research Program at UCSF.)

Survivors of Violence:

Judith Lewis Herman, Ph.D. has studied trauma and resilience in many people and places, including domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and combat and political torture survivors. The following are some key resilience factors (psycho-social) in having a more connected and contributive life post trauma:

- **Help:** The ability to help another during the trauma
- **Greater Meaning:** The ability to make greater meaning and purpose of the traumatic experience
- **Relationship:** The experience of staying positively connected to at least one other person

(Judith Lewis Herman is a psychiatrist, researcher, and teacher at Harvard Medical School. She directs the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Health Alliance.)

Imagination

Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. is important in his role of defining and then broadening PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as a valid diagnosis for people suffering trauma after war and abuse. He has done numerous studies on PTSD, particularly with children who have witnessed global catastrophes. One of his biggest findings is how important the role of imagination is to people's resilience after trauma:

- **Imagination:** The ability to imagine positive and sustaining futures, and to resolve trauma.

(Dutch researcher and academic Dr. Van der Kolk is a Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University Medical School, and Medical Director of the Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute.)

Shared Collective Experiences

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Ph.D.'s work is rooted in her participation in the

South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). The TRC was a restorative justice process between victims and perpetrators of violence that took place during South African apartheid. Her studies of black South African townships post assassinations and state violence found:

- **Collective movement, drumming and song** increased collective resilience and decreased intra-community violence after state based political assassinations
- **Isolation led to increased intra-community violence**

(Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is a South African psychologist and academic who participated in the TRC. Currently teaches at the University of Cape Town. She wrote the book, “A Human Being Died That Night: A Story of Forgiveness.”)

Resilience vs. Survival Strategies

Sometimes there is a fine line between resilience strategies and conditioned tendencies (CT) or ways we have tried to survive. To understand and feel the difference we can practice moving between the two.

Resilience practices leave us feeling more connected, more open, and with a greater sense of safety. Resilience practices leave us ready to take action toward a better future for ourselves and others. We will have a wider range of sensations and emotions with resilience, like it is ok to feel more and be more alive, rather than numb.

Our conditioned tendencies or survival strategies, on the other hand, tend to leave us more numb, tight or contracted, with less feeling. While these strategies have been smart, and this might feel “safe” or familiar, this way of surviving tends to disconnect us, leave us more alone or isolated and feeling less whole.

This distinction is true in our individual lives and in our communities and movements. We have collective resilience, and we have collective ways we survive. In one way or another, they all have taken care of us, but **our collective resilience moves us toward hope, interdependence, and vision for the future we want.**