

The occupational perspective of building resilience in individuals, communities and countries

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Resilience is a contested concept: academic, practice, policy and lay definitions vary but all agree that resilience involves a positive response to adversity. Common adversities include ill-health, disability, poverty, discrimination, war, disasters and climate change. All of these can have occupational consequences for people, for example: unemployment, restricted opportunities to pursue interests and barriers to engaging in activities with others. Indeed, as much occupational science literature argues, these occupational consequences can be considered adversities themselves.

These adversities impact individuals but also whole communities, countries and our shared world. Hence the compelling desire to build resilience at all these levels. This has led resilience research and practice to move beyond a narrow focus on individual resilience to more ecological models of resilience. Within this some resilience experts have gone further and challenged the idea that resilience building is simply about supporting people to 'cope' with adversity. Once resilience is thought of as a system it makes no sense to think that only some parts of that system are open to change. Accordingly, building resilience may involve 'coping' with adversity but can also involve transforming adversity. The idea of responding to an adversity by transforming it is highly compatible with occupational therapy theory and practice. Occupational therapy can involve supporting people to develop 'coping' strategies – but it can also involve changing their social or physical environments.

Resilience building approaches have largely focused on developing internal assets (notably psychological and emotional) and external assets (principally economic and social capital). This keynote will draw on examples from research and practice to argue that in these challenging times enhancing people's occupational capital – a newly developed concept – can play an essential role in building individual and global resilience too.