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Harvey J. Burnett Jr.

Andrews University, harveyb@andrews.edu

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Psychological Body Armor: *Factors that Contribute to Resilience Capacity*

by Harvey J. Burnett Jr.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE CHANCES OF exposure to a traumatic event in today's world are high. In addition, numerous research studies have indicated that regardless of the type of traumatic event (i.e., a natural disaster or a human-driven incident), individuals who have been exposed to such incidents are at greater risk of developing psychological after-effects. However, the majority of people who are exposed to a trauma do not develop chronic posttraumatic stress symptoms but rather are able to either resist manifestations of psychological impairment or bounce back from a short period of distress. In other words, a person's Psychological Body Armor (PBA) or, as defined by trauma expert George Everly, "unique form of human resilience," may play a role in helping one to overcome a trauma or other adverse life experiences.

As stated above, PBA is a unique form of resilience that is comprised of two important pathways: proactive resilience and reactive resilience. Proactive resilience

is considered one's immunity to a crisis, while reactive resilience involves one's ability to bounce back from adverse experiences. Furthermore, each pathway has several specific components that influence resilience, and identifying which component(s) contributes strongly to that pathway will help lead to the development of evidence-based practices that build PBA capacity. This is particularly important for professionals who provide emergency and crisis intervention services to those impacted by traumatic events since they are at a higher risk of developing vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue and other stress-related symptoms.

Given that PBA is more of a theoretical concept and has sparse empirical validity in the trauma literature, a research team from the School of Social & Behavioral Sciences conducted an exploratory investigation to broaden our understanding of PBA. The team consisted of myself; Karl Bailey, professor of psychology and director of the undergraduate

Behavioral Neuroscience program; and Rachele Pichot. It is important to note that Rachele was one of our undergraduate psychology research mentees at the time of the study and is now a graduate student in the Andrews University Department of Graduate Psychology & Counseling.

The purpose of our study was to measure which wellbeing and behavioral action component(s) for the proactive and reactive resilience pathways contributed significantly toward PBA. The components that we examined for the proactive pathway included self-acceptance,

"In other words, having a high realistic and positive orientation of self, being highly happy, having a good purpose in life, and being actively engaged in spiritual growth were associated with strong immunity."

purpose in life, subjective happiness and spirituality. For the reactive pathway the components measured were perceived stress, psychological distress, positive relationship with others, sleep quality, physical fitness activity, and three nutrition questions that asked about eating three healthy meals per day and the regular consumption of sugary and caffeinated drinks.

Data was collected online from 202 participants who volunteered to complete the study through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform in 2017. Approximately 48 percent of participants were female and ranged in age from 22 to 76 years with the average age being 38. Eighty-five of the participants were white (non-Hispanic), 48 percent were married, 44 percent had graduated from college, 53 percent identified as not belonging to any religious affiliation, and the medium income was \$55,000. Participants were also compensated \$0.50 for completing the study.

First, we explored which component(s) for each pathway were statistically related to resilience. The results showed that for the proactive pathway, self-acceptance, subjective happiness, purpose in life, and spirituality were related to overall resilience. In other words,

having a high realistic and positive orientation of self, being highly happy, having a good purpose in life, and being actively engaged in spiritual growth were associated with strong immunity. For the reactive pathway, positive relationship with others, sleep quality, perceived stress, and psychological distress were related to overall resilience. Thus, having a positive relationship with others, having high sleep quality, exhibiting low stress, and low psychological distress were associated with a strong ability to bounce back from adverse life experiences.

We then looked at which component(s) significantly predicts resilience for each pathway. Results showed that the wellbeing components of self-acceptance and subjective happiness were significant predictors of PBA for the proactive pathway. On the other hand, the wellbeing components of positive relationship with others and low psychological distress and the behavioral activity component of physical fitness activity were significant predictors of PBA for the reactive pathway.

Finally, using a special method known as Comparative Qualitative Analysis, we examined which configuration of components for each pathway consistently overlap for possessing strong PBA (resilience). For the proactive pathway,

“...having a positive relationship with others, having high sleep quality, exhibiting low stress, and low psychological distress were associated with a strong ability to bounce back from adverse life experiences.”

highly resilient participants have a high sense of self-acceptance and a high degree of happiness. Highly resilient participants for the reactive pathway exhibit a high amount of good sleep quality but also may have a high degree of positive relationship with others and have a low level of psychological distress.

Based on the results of the study, we were able to preliminarily identify empirically which factors contribute to strong PBA through two unique pathways. This is extremely important for two reasons. First, emergency and disaster mental health response professionals can use this data to create evidence-based individual and specialized training programs that help to strengthen their PBA. This would help to reduce the risk of responders developing vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue, burnout and other negative

stress-related symptoms that could impede their ability to function professionally and personally. Secondly, mental health professionals, spiritual leaders, school counselors and other related specialists can use our findings to develop evidence-based curriculum and self-empowerment programs that can better equip their patients, clients, students, church members and the general public to respond more positively to adverse life experiences. Again, the purpose is to build communities that are more resilient in the long term. Our study was published in “Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal” in September 2019 and was presented at the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation’s 15th World Congress on Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience in May 2019 in Baltimore, Maryland.

The following two charts provide a guide that one can use to build their PBA for each pathway. Components identified with a triple asterisk are considered the strongest and should be an automatic element of constructing a robust PBA. ■

Harvey J. Burnett Jr., PhD, is associate professor of psychology and chair of the Andrews University School of Social & Behavioral Sciences.

Proactive Resilience

(Immunity)

Happiness***

Intentionally engage in behaviors that promote the experience of joy, commitment, positive wellbeing, and the sense that your life is good and worthwhile.

Self-Acceptance***

Focus on developing a growth mindset—the belief that your basic qualities/abilities are things you can develop through your efforts.

Purpose in Life

Focus on engaging in activities that help to develop and cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose for you.

Spirituality

Take time to invest in fostering your spiritual growth and development.

Reactive Resilience

(Ability to rebound from adversity)

Sleep Quality***

Practice maintaining a consistent optimal sleep schedule for yourself.

Psychological Distress***

Actively participate in activities and interventions that will help you to increase positive psychological wellbeing and reduce depression and anxiety.

Positive Relationship with Others***

Take time to invest in, cultivate and nurture your present and new social support systems.

Perceived Stress

Purposely engage in using and building coping strategies that help you to positively manage and reduce your stress (“The Road to Resilience” <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>).

Physical Activity

Practice maintaining a regular physical activity regimen for yourself.