



Attitudes that Undermine Resilience Building

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Introduction

Resilience is one of the subjects studied by positive psychologists. Positive psychology was launched in the late 1990s and focuses on identifying and building on your strengths and virtues (what's right with you), rather than looking at your deficits and weaknesses (what's wrong with you) which is the usual remit of traditional psychology. However, some psychologists argue (and I agree) that we don't need to separate psychology into types, as psychology 'spans the whole of the human condition, from disorder and distress to well-being and fulfilment' (Linley et al., 2006: 6).

If developing resilience can help you to overcome adversity and find ways of creating a better life for yourself, then we need to identify the blocks to its development and what can be done to remove them. What follows are some attitudes that keep people trapped in responding poorly to the difficulties they face; these attitudes are not the only ones that interfere with resilience building, just the common ones I encounter in my practice. These attitudes are not set in stone, so ways to change them are also presented. It's important to point out that some people, for whatever reason, don't reach out to learn resilience. They're overwhelmed and demoralized by their unsuccessful attempts to cope with adversity and happiness continually eludes them. A few will see suicide as the only option to end their suffering. Such individuals require a compassionate understanding of their plight, not condemnation because they fail to overcome the challenges they face. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, resilience is not about dividing people into winners or losers, quitters or fighters but offered as a capacity open to all to learn.

'It's not my fault I've been made a victim'

This means feeling helpless and angry in the face of adverse events, continually blaming others for your misfortunes and seeing the world divided into victims and villains. Anyone who questions your victim status is accused of victim blaming. Leahy (2001) suggests that when a therapist attempts to help such clients by encouraging them to focus on problem solving, this too invites accusations of victim blaming and making light of their suffering: 'I see, I'm just supposed to get on with my life as if being viciously mugged is of no account whatsoever; in other words, I'm making too much of a fuss about it'.

The victim's story can become the only story in your life, forever ready to relate to others – if they're still listening to you – your tales of suffering and helplessness. Being a victim has become your identity; this often leads to a state of infantilization where you can't be expected to take responsibility for dealing with your difficulties ('How can I? I'm still hurting'). If you mix with others who have similar stories to tell, you're likely to become involved in a competition to establish whose suffering is the worst. The longer you justify your victim status, the harder it will become to break free of it and develop other facets of your personality and life. Incidentally, this competition in suffering can also be seen in grief: 'Look how much I loved her/him and with these tears I prove it (and win the trophy)' (Barnes, 2014: 114). Competitive mourning has been called the narcissism of grief (Oates, 2011) where my loss is the most devastating, heart-rending and I remain utterly inconsolable (unlike my friend who'll get over her loss).

While you may have been treated unfairly at the hands of others and not received the redress you were seeking, it's still your inescapable responsibility to decide if you want to remain dependent upon your pain in order to attract sympathy or put boundaries around the pain and escape from the victim trap (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). For example, Peter was bullied by his boss and eventually took sick leave having been worn down by the experience: 'Nobody took my complaints seriously. They just said "it's a tough environment we work in and you've got to get on with it"'. He left his job but couldn't let go of how he'd been treated by his boss who, he later learned, had been promoted. He saw this promotion as his boss being rewarded for treating him badly.

In our sessions, he spent some time venting his understandable anger at his boss's mistreatment of him and the company culture that 'turned a blind eye' to such behaviour. But more importantly, we focused on how his continuing anger and sense of helplessness about correcting this

injustice were having corrosive effects on his life; principally, his reluctance to find another job in case the bullying happened again.

I argued there were two forms of injustice: first, what his boss did to him and, second, the injustice he would do to himself if he didn't pursue his desired goals, forever blaming the bullying for holding him back in life. He considered the second one, the self-inflicted injustice, as the truly destructive one. He saw the sense in regarding the bullying as a time-limited event (it occurred over a six-month period) that would not adversely affect the rest of his life. I taught him some techniques for standing up to a bullying boss (see Chapter 8). Looking beyond the bullying, he felt he was beginning to regain control over his life.

Before I leave this section, I'd like to make some comments on helplessness which is a key feature of victimhood. When people say they 'feel helpless' they really mean 'I believe I'm helpless' (an assumption, not a feeling or a fact). Believing you're helpless is a choice you make. The late philosopher Isaiah Berlin observed:

Action is choice; choice is free commitment to this or that way of behaving, living, and so on; the possibilities are never fewer than two: to do or not to do; be or not to be . . . it is always possible, though sometimes painful, to ask myself what it is that I really believe, want, value, what it is that I am doing, living for; and having answered as well as I am able, to continue to act in a given fashion or alter my behaviour.

(2013: 96)

It may seem to you that it's equally painful if you stay the same or change, but the pain associated with change carries with it the possibility of a brighter future, whereas staying the same sees only a bleak one. Finally, a choice is a choice whether it's straightforward or hard to make, so don't become trapped by thinking that choices should only be easy and painless.

'I'll never get over it'

The 'it' may be a traumatic event, troubled childhood or any misfortune you believe has robbed you of any future happiness or irreparably damaged your life. Some clients describe the 'it' as having 'left me in pieces'. From this viewpoint, it's reasonable to ask: can a broken Humpty Dumpty be put together again? (Some writers use the nursery rhyme character to introduce this discussion.) Flach (2004) argues that falling

apart in the face of significant stress is a normal – even necessary – part of the resilience response as, during this period of disruption, new ways of reacting to tough times can be developed so that the pieces of ourselves can be reassembled in sturdier ways. Our old ways of dealing with things have become obsolete, forcing us to find new ways to cope.

However, this period of disruption is not without its risks. The pieces can be reassembled successfully or fail to cohere into a meaningful whole that leaves you ‘forever more or less destabilized’ (Flach, 2004: 13). Going through a period of severe stress can either be grasped as a valuable learning experience for both present and future benefit or thrown away because, for example, you refuse to accept that anything good can ever come from anything bad.

I saw an executive, Roger, who’d been overwhelmed by the relentless pressures placed upon him. He felt depressed (‘I’m a failure, washed up at 42’), angry (‘What were they trying to do, kill me?’) and ashamed that he couldn’t cope with the pressure (‘I’m weak for the whole world to see’). He believed his life was in pieces. When he seemed receptive to the message, I pointed out to him that ‘Humpty Dumpties’ can be made whole again. He was intrigued that he could reconfigure the pieces of himself and move his life in a different direction. However, despite this interest, he remained unyielding in his view that he should’ve been able to handle the pressure and that he would be ‘stained with the mark of weakness for the rest of [his] life’. He dropped out of therapy after several sessions and I never saw him again.

Sometimes the process of self-repair can take a long time. In a famous long-term study (from youth to old age) of socially disadvantaged men (one of three groups studied), Professor George Vaillant and his team at Harvard University tracked their progress and came up with some surprising and welcome conclusions (as Vaillant (2012) says, to investigate adult development properly requires lifelong study). A poor start in life doesn’t have to mean that a happy and fulfilling existence cannot eventually be achieved:

The disadvantaged youth becomes a loving and creative success; the child who ‘did not have a chance’ turns out to be a happy and healthy adult. We have much to learn from these once-fragmented Humpty Dumpties who ten – or even forty – years later become whole.

(Vaillant, 1993: 284)

If you study someone’s life at a particular point, you might see her struggling unsuccessfully against the odds and this snapshot might lead you to make gloomy predictions about how her life is going to turn out. Revisit

her life in 5, 10 or 15 years' time and these predictions may have proved inaccurate. I worked in the National Health Service for 20 years and saw many clients who led chaotic, self-destructive lives. Some died, some seemed forever trapped in a cycle of despair, and some pulled through. If I was a betting man I would've lost a lot of money predicting who would and who wouldn't eventually make it.

'I can't stand it!'

Also called low frustration tolerance (LFT; Ellis, 2001), this attitude refers to your perceived inability to endure frustration (e.g. delaying gratification), boredom, negative feelings, hard work (e.g. tackling your procrastination), inconvenience, setbacks – if something cannot be easily and quickly attained you give up. The cognitive core of LFT is 'I can't stand present discomfort in order to achieve future gain'. LFT is a key reason why some clients drop out of therapy or coaching when the hard work of change begins; that is, putting into daily practice the CBT skills they've learnt. LFT is a deceptive outlook because it encourages you to think that you're winning by avoiding difficulty, whereas your life is actually becoming much harder to manage in the longer term as your unresolved problems pile up and opportunities for self-development aren't grasped because they seem like too much hard work.

Helen wanted to learn French but left the course after two sessions as she found it embarrassing having to practise in front of others and realized she wasn't going to become fluent in French *immediately*. She'd tried to learn Spanish and classical guitar the previous year but gave up for the same reasons. She kept vowing to get fit, seek a new job, find a relationship, make life more exciting, but all to no avail. Ironically, in avoiding the discomfort of persevering with change, she ended up suffering the greater discomfort of a dull and unfulfilled life. Which is more unendurable, the discomfort of maintaining the status quo in your life or the discomfort of changing it in order to arrive at a brighter future?

To make matters worse, she frequently became angry and depressed for giving up too easily ('What's wrong with me? Why can't I stick at things?'). She had a triple dose of discomfort – a dull life plus being angry and depressed for not persevering with her efforts to change. In therapy, she kept demanding instant answers to understand her problems and easy solutions to solve them.

When you make LFT statements such as 'I can't stand it when there's a long queue in the shops', what does 'I can't stand it' actually mean? Will you die as a result of having to put up with frustration or go into

psychological meltdown because you have to stick with doing boring tasks? Or you may think that you can't be happy if you have to deal with disagreeable events. In fact, many people actually do stand what they believe they can't stand. The challenge is to find better ways of standing it; namely, choosing to seek out the avoided tasks and situations in order to prove to yourself that frustration is indeed tolerable, nothing terrible will happen to you while you're feeling frustrated and that future gain is worth fighting for. In Helen's case, the challenge was to persevere with her efforts, among other things, to learn French and classical guitar. Frustrations in life are inevitable; disturbing yourself about these frustrations doesn't have to be (Hauk, 1980).

'Why me?'

People often ask this question when they've experienced a traumatic event. The answer is usually implicit in the question: 'It shouldn't have happened to me. I've done nothing to deserve this.' (The word 'should', when used by clients throughout this book, is meant in the imperative sense of expressing commands and demands.) 'Why me?' suggests you believe in immunity justification; that is, offering reasons why bad events shouldn't happen to you. Your assumption of a just and fair world has been shattered by a traumatic event (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). As de Botton observes: 'The continuing belief that the world is fundamentally just is implied in the very complaint that there has been an injustice' (2001: 93).

For example, John was involved in a multiple car crash and sustained some significant injuries. He was very angry about this happening to him. He kept on insisting that he was a 'very conscientious person'. The connection between this virtue and the car crash initially seemed puzzling. However, in teasing out John's sense of logic, it became clear that being a very conscientious person should have given him an exemption from 'anything horrible in life'. He said, 'I could understand it if I'd been a lazy, work-shy kind of person or someone who's a liar and a cheat, an unpleasant person, but I'm not that kind of person'. His idea of how the universe worked had been 'mocked and destroyed'. He now saw himself as the victim of cruel, uncontrollable forces and couldn't see how any constructive meaning or order could be restored to his life. He even wondered at times if he'd been deceiving himself and was, in fact, a bad person who deserved punishment (if a person believes prior to the trauma that she is bad, this view is likely to be confirmed when it happens).

'Why me?' introspection is unlikely to yield any useful answers that will help you in your time of distress (this is my experience in working

with such clients). For what answers would satisfy you? That the world can be random and capricious; therefore, what happened to you is not actually about *you*. Goodness is no protection against experiencing adversity. What happened was completely unseen, a bolt out of the blue; the driver had a heart attack, his car swerved across the road and hit you. (Some clients will say or think, 'Why couldn't he have hit the car in front of or behind me instead of mine?' implying that they were singled out in some way by the driver or fate.) 'Why me?' is an unappeasable question. To keep on searching for answers that will only prove unsatisfactory prevents you from starting to process the trauma in a constructive way; accepting the grim reality of events and learning how to adapt to them in order to start getting your life back to some form of normality.

A very different perspective might provide an answer, 'Why not me?' This question states an unpalatable truth: that no one is exempt from experiencing the possibility of tragedy or trauma, no matter how well you lead your life. Obviously the timing of such a question is crucial. The therapist is likely to be seen as callous if he asks it before the client has been given the space to explore her reactions to the trauma. When the question is eventually asked, in a sensitive, non-accusatory way, it can take a different form such as 'Have you ever considered that everyone is likely to experience some misfortune in their life?'

Mary had been mugged and listed her own immunity justification, 'Bad things shouldn't happen to good people', but came round to the idea of 'Why not me?' She said the idea made sense to her (unlike John) and began to break free from the restraints of 'why meism'. However, her new belief was 'Now that I've had my one [mugging], I'll be safe. It's someone else's turn.' The philosophy of 'Why not me?' also includes the possibility that it could happen again, which Mary hadn't considered. She was reinstating immunity justification into her new outlook. We discussed the trap she might be setting for herself and she removed the justification. Two years later Mary was robbed on the London Underground. She said that what stopped her 'from completely disintegrating' was her acceptance that horrible things could happen to her again.

'You can't escape the past'

The past maintains its unshakeable and malign grip on your present behaviour ('It's like being chained for ever to what happened earlier in my life'), depriving you of any real happiness or feeling of freedom. It's not the past itself that maintains this grip but the beliefs you've

constructed about these past events which you still believe today. It's the beliefs that are the chains. The past is unalterable; your beliefs about it are not (breaking the chains). In his teenage years, Darren found out that he'd been adopted and jumped to the conclusion that he must be unloveable because his real parents had abandoned him. I met him when he was 30 and he still believed this:

MICHAEL: Before you found out you'd been adopted, how did you see yourself?

DARREN: I saw myself as okay, just normal.

MICHAEL: What was life like with your adoptive parents?

DARREN: It was happy. I liked it.

MICHAEL: Why did you think you were unloveable when you found out your biological parents put you up for adoption?

DARREN: It's obvious. Everybody would think like that if it happened to them.

MICHAEL: Could you explain the obvious to me?

DARREN: Well, if you're a loveable baby then your parents would want to keep you. That makes sense, doesn't it?

MICHAEL: Could you be a loveable baby but still be put up for adoption?

DARREN: I suppose so.

MICHAEL: What reasons might there be for doing that?

DARREN: Well, I know about that. I've discussed that with my adoptive parents. My real parents had lots of problems, some of them psychiatric, and they couldn't really cope with their own lives let alone bring up a child, so they wanted the best for me because they couldn't provide it themselves.

MICHAEL: Presumably you don't find that a convincing explanation.

DARREN: No, I don't. What continues to anger me all these years later is that if they really wanted me then they would have found a way to keep me. They just would have found a way. It's as simple as that.

MICHAEL: And because they didn't find a way to keep you, the only answer can be that you were and remain unloveable. And you're stuck with that view of yourself.

DARREN: That's right. What else am I supposed to think then?

MICHAEL: Well, given what you know about your parents' struggles and their inability to cope with their problems, you expected them to somehow become superhuman, fight to keep you and win. In other words, to be the kind of people you wanted them to be. But they couldn't be anything other than the people they were at that time: individuals struggling unsuccessfully to overcome their problems.

DARREN: I suppose that's true. I never saw it that way. I suppose my parents couldn't be anything else other than how they were, though it's hard to get my mind round that.

MICHAEL: Another thing to try and get your mind around is that you keep labelling yourself as unloveable because you were adopted. Being adopted didn't make you unloveable, if you were truly unloveable then how could your adoptive parents love you to bits? Being adopted isn't the problem, maintaining this negative view of yourself is. Every day you can decide to keep it or begin to change it.

DARREN: How do I do that then?

MICHAEL: By what we've been doing today: stepping back from this belief that you're unloveable and starting to examine it critically. It's as if you've been brainwashing yourself for fifteen years that you can't be anything else other than unloveable.

Eventually, Darren was able to see and accept the following points: that he'd rejected himself when told he'd been adopted and, in consequence, had been perpetuating this self-rejection for fifteen years; that the quality of his life with his adoptive parents was probably far better than his real parents could've provided if they'd kept him; and that who his real parents are isn't determined biologically, but by the people who provided a loving environment for him to grow up within and who continue to stand by him through thick and thin.

'It shouldn't have happened'

How many times have you said that? You were hoping for a different outcome to the one that occurred. For example:

- You're low on petrol and keep passing petrol stations. You're not prepared to queue in your eagerness to get home after a tiring day at the office. You eventually run out of petrol several miles from home and ask incredulously, 'How could this have happened?'
- You've no skills or interest in DIY but decide reluctantly, at the urging of your partner, to 'have a go' and end up with a host of problems which require the services of a professional to put right. You shake your head in disbelief at the large fees you have to pay for his services.
- Your car has faulty brakes and is going into the garage for repairs in several days' time, but you think you'll be safe if you continue to drive but only at night when there's less traffic on the road. You crash the car and are off work for several weeks. You can't believe how reckless and stupid you've been.

As Edelman observes: ‘Everything that we say and do, including those things that turn out to have negative consequences, happens because all the factors that were necessary for them to occur were present at the time’ (2006: 74). From this perspective, these events should have happened, not shouldn’t have happened, based upon your wishful thinking which ignored inconvenient truths. Warburton defines wishful thinking as ‘believing that because it would be nice if something were true, then it must actually be true’ (2007: 160). In the first example, your over-riding concern was to get home, not to get petrol, and you thought you could achieve it even though the petrol gauge was indicating otherwise. In the second, you believed you would be able to do a reasonable job, not a badly botched one, without having any DIY skills. In the third, you took a chance that your faulty brakes wouldn’t put you in danger if you were cautious by going out only at night, and that your brakes would ‘be aware’ of your caution and not let you down by failing (assuming the brakes have a mechanical intelligence that understands and responds to your apprehension).

So it’s futile to keep telling yourself that ‘it shouldn’t have happened’ (as if this will change the outcome of past events) when all the conditions were in place for it to have happened in the way it did. While we all engage in wishful thinking sometimes, it’s important to subject such thinking to logical scrutiny to see if it really does make sense to you (conclusion: ‘My brakes can fail at any time, so don’t drive the car’). Or, to put it another way, such scrutiny is like throwing a bucket of cold water over yourself, waking you up to the possibility – likely probability – that you’re deceiving yourself in some way. Acting on this probability should realistically lead to fewer instances of ‘it shouldn’t have happened’ and head-shaking disbelief.

‘I’m a failure’

Such self-devaluation keeps you in a state of demoralized inertia as you act in accordance with your self-image; it’s as if you’ve surrendered to the belief and declared ‘This is how I am and this is how I’ll stay’. Even though you probably see both of these statements as unchangeable facts, they’re actually assumptions that you’re making about yourself and your life which are open to examination and change. For example, if you’re a genuine failure as a person then all you can ever do – past, present and future – is fail; even if you wanted to succeed, your essence or identity as a failure wouldn’t allow it. A review of your life to this point will definitely not support the idea that you’re a failure if you’re open to finding disconfirming evidence, and your future is still to be revealed.

However, what's likely to stop you from seeing this disconfirming evidence is your negative belief functioning as a self-prejudice (Padesky, 1994); that is, your 'I'm a failure' belief rejects any evidence that might contradict it and seeks evidence only to confirm it. Think of a belief you don't agree with such as 'all women are bad drivers'. While listening to the person holding this belief, you might make yourself incensed: 'Why can't he see that women, just like men, are both good and bad drivers? Women have a better safety record than men, they're more careful. He's such a pig-headed git!' He won't be able to hear you because he has a fixed attitude and no amount of contrary evidence is going to shift it (at least not yet).

So, if we come back to your view that you're a failure, then you're doing exactly the same thing that he's doing; namely, discounting any evidence that doesn't fit in with your point of view. Some of my clients give this belief-as-self-prejudice a name such as 'ratbag', 'Bill' or 'the whisperer' (e.g. 'That ratbag is talking again but I'm listening to her less and less'). And the reason you're paying less attention is because you're looking at all the evidence about yourself and your life, not just focusing on examples of failure.

All self-devaluation beliefs are illogical because they are based on the part = whole error. An aspect of the self, such as a failed relationship, can never capture the complexity of the whole (you) or the totality of your life. There are other aspects of you that also contribute to making up the whole, but these are overlooked in your rush to self-condemnation. For example, when something goes right in your life does this make you a success? Can you be a failure yesterday and a success today? Neither label can do justice to the complexity of a person. Would you attach labels to your children and announce to the world that you've captured their essence as human beings? The inevitable failures and setbacks that we experience are part of the story of our life, but certainly not the whole story.

'I'm not me anymore. I feel like a phony'

Clients sometimes complain, when tackling their problems, of feeling strange or unnatural as they start to think, feel and act in new and unfamiliar ways: 'This doesn't feel like me. I'm very uncomfortable with all this.' This dissonant state – the conflict or disharmony between old and new ways of doing things – can lead to some clients dropping out of therapy or coaching in order to feel natural again (i.e. returning to the status quo in their lives which they were keen to change a few weeks or months earlier). This dissonant state is a natural part of the change process and will need to be tolerated until it passes; old habits may now

seem unfamiliar. Thinking, feeling and acting differently indicates newness, not phoniness. Hauck (1982) likens this dissonant state to wearing in a new pair of shoes.

‘Why can’t I find happiness?’

This plaintive enquiry is often heard in therapy with clients hoping that the therapist will come up with a happiness formula for them. No matter what the person tries, happiness continues to elude her, so each new activity undertaken (e.g. yoga) is interrogated, ‘Will *this* make me happy?’ Another person achieves the success he’s been chasing (e.g. gaining a much sought-after position in the company), but experiences post-success disillusionment as he believed all his discontents would disappear once his dream was realized. He sets himself and achieves another goal in his attempt to capture happiness but it remains out of reach. As Grayling remarks: ‘It has wisely been said that the search for happiness is one of the main sources of unhappiness in the world’ (2002: 71).

If the search for happiness does indeed end in unhappiness, then how are we to be happy? Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl explained thus: ‘Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to “be happy”. Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically’ (1985: 162). What he meant by this is that happiness is a by-product or the result of an interesting and meaningful life (ensue), not the central goal of your life (pursue). I believe that Frankl’s message is an eminently wise one and the ‘formula’ I teach my clients if they’re receptive to it. Some of them say they’re now seeking a more meaningful and interesting life, not pursuing happiness, but, alas, a few are still holding on to the old attitude (e.g. ‘I’ve always wanted to do choir singing, so I joined a choir, but it’s not making me happy!’).

Not facing reality

In Chapter 1, I discussed the popular but unrealistic view that resilience is bouncing back from adversity. Such a view encourages what might be called resilience perfectionism; for instance, rising immediately to the challenge of adversity and overcoming it with faultless determination which elicits the admiration of others. Struggling to recover from misfortune departs from this ideal response and you angrily condemn yourself for failing to act ‘in the right way’. Effort and struggle are to be despised as they point to deficiencies of character, ‘It means I’m not in complete control of myself’.

I once saw a senior manager who was a formidable problem solver, the more intractable the problem, the more he liked it – ‘Bring it on’ – until one day at work he experienced a panic attack and discovered, to his horror, that his problem-solving prowess was ineffective with panic (he thought some tough self-talk would do the trick). In fact, his panic attacks were getting worse and, in consequence, his performance and concentration were suffering. He was angry and dumbfounded by this state of affairs and kept asking incredulously, ‘How could this happen to *me*?’ He had a fixed view of his character and believed it would function in the way he told it to as if it was an obedient dog. I explained to him that he could deal with the panic attacks relatively quickly if he allowed me to show him how. His usual response was, ‘You don’t understand. This is not *me*.’

His panic attacks undoubtedly belonged to him but, in his mind, they were the mark of a weak person; as he never saw himself as weak, they therefore couldn’t be part of him. Why couldn’t I understand that? He feared his character was beginning to unravel as he couldn’t see a solution to a problem that he shouldn’t have. After a few sessions, he left therapy none the wiser and berated himself for coming in the first place as this was another worrying sign of the weakness he was forbidden to have.

Needless to say, this is a self-defeating, self-deluding response to dealing with panic attacks or other problems because there will come a time when your expected (or in his case fixed) way of responding to events isn’t working; new ways need to be explored if there’s going to be a favourable outcome. Your way may have been the right way so far, but it doesn’t have to remain the only way.

Another means of not dealing with the reality facing you is spending too much time daydreaming about or regretting not pursuing the un-lived life (i.e. the road not taken) – ‘I should’ve married Mary all those years ago’ – which you believe would have undoubtedly led to great happiness and fulfilment as opposed to the lived life of frequent struggle, intermittent happiness and unrealized potential. As Phillips observes: ‘We discover these un-lived lives most obviously in our envy of other people, and in the conscious (and unconscious) demands we make on our children to become something that was beyond us. And, of course, in our daily frustrations’ (2013: xii–iii).

While brooding about the road not taken, it’s also worth remembering that it could have led to discontent and disillusionment if taken: ‘I wish I’d never met and married Mary. It was a disaster.’ While the un-lived life is part of the lived life, as our visits there demonstrate, too much mental

wandering in the land of what could have been reduces the time, effort and concentration we require to improve the quality of the lived life.

‘I need to know’

Intolerance of uncertainty is the core issue for most people who worry (Leahy, 2006). You believe you have to know *now* what’s going to happen. Not knowing will leave you feeling on edge and you won’t be able to focus on anything else. You can’t enjoy life with this uncertainty hanging over you and you continually dwell on ‘What if’ imaginings (e.g. ‘What if she’s having an affair?’), which generate more ‘What ifs’ such as ‘What if she leaves me?’, ‘What if I can’t cope on my own?’ and ‘What if I can’t pay the mortgage?’ These proliferating ‘What ifs’ lead you to conclude that you’ve many more problems than you actually do and that you’re losing control of your mind.

For example, Stanley had been suspended from work pending a disciplinary hearing and brooded endlessly on losing his job, the shame involved in being sacked, finding another job at 45, never being happy again – whatever could go wrong in his life would now go wrong. He kept on insisting in our sessions:

If they could just tell me today whether they’re going to keep me or kick me out, then at least I would be put out of my misery. This disciplinary process is going to go on for another few months. It’s mental torture. They should bloody well give me a decision instead of dragging it out!

(Stanley)

The mental torture was largely self-inflicted as Stanley demanded that the disciplinary process run to his timetable, not the company’s. He kept on assuming that the outcome of the hearing would mean the loss of his job, rather than the possibility he might keep it, and that he couldn’t focus on anything else in his life until he had a decision.

Instead of demanding to know the unknowable before a decision was announced, Stanley focused on what he did know and could do, such as re-engaging in daily family activities. Additionally, Stanley flooded himself with uncertainty every day (Leahy, 2006) by saying to himself many times ‘I could possibly lose my job’. In order to tolerate this thought without distress, he focused on developing contingency plans in case this did happen (he’d been avoiding doing this), and realized that any shame he may experience would be time-limited, not lifelong. By

undertaking these activities, Stanley felt in control of himself in the face of uncertainty. He did lose his job, but the shock was moderate and he found another one within three months. Learning to tolerate uncertainty can bring forth some unexpected strengths, even if the results you were looking for from the situation don't materialize (i.e. keeping your job).

'I don't feel confident'

How many times have you said this before trying anything new? Why should you feel confident if you haven't done it before? I see clients with performance anxiety (e.g. running a workshop or engaging in public speaking for the first time) who want to be articulate, witty, insightful, calm and cool, answer every question with impressive authority and get wonderful evaluations from the audience for their performance; in other words, they want to deliver a perfect performance. Yet their fear is falling well below this standard and being revealed as hopelessly incompetent, a laughing stock.

They always start in the wrong place in assessing their performance: they're beginners, not accomplished performers; so it's important to have beginner's expectations, not those of a star performer. If they do want to become star performers, then they need to realize it could be a long road before they get there rather than, in their minds, achieving instant acclaim. Feeling confident before you do something new and potentially risky is putting the cart before the horse. Furthermore, courage usually comes before confidence; you're prepared to take the risk of putting yourself in your discomfort zone and staying there without knowing how the situation will turn out. Your legs shake, your heart pounds, your voice falters and your stomach churns, but you force yourself into the limelight. Talk of confidence at this stage is premature. Also, your view of confidence is one-sided as it only envisages a successful outcome. Being resilient means that real confidence embraces both success and defeat – neither is taken too seriously – and that learning from whatever happens is the true focus of self-development.

'I'm a pessimist by nature'

This usually means that when you've a setback you believe the consequences will be catastrophic, wiping out any present or future happiness. You're unlikely to persevere when the going gets tough ('What's the point?') and you slip back into a state of helplessness and self-blame, believing that you've no control over events in your life. Seligman

(1991) states that this pessimistic outlook consists of three key elements when a negative event occurs:

- *permanence* – ‘It’s going to last for ever’;
- *pervasiveness* – ‘It’s going to undermine everything I’ve tried to achieve in my life’;
- *personalization* – ‘It’s my fault’.

When my clients say that pessimism is part of them, they usually mean it’s inborn and therefore unchangeable. Some clients declare at the beginning of therapy that ‘you won’t be able to help me’. I see this as a hypothesis to be talked about and tested, not an accurate prediction of how therapy will unfold.

Optimists, by contrast, see negative events as temporary (‘It will blow over soon’), specific (‘It only affects one area of my life’), and place responsibility for the event on an external cause (‘My boss was in a foul mood today’), or take personal responsibility without self-condemnation (‘I was rather slow on this occasion in getting the report in on time’). Pessimists dwell on their problems whereas optimists seek constructive ways of dealing with them.

How we explain events to ourselves is called explanatory style. As you can see, optimists and pessimists have very different explanatory styles. These two styles are habitual ways of thinking, but habits can be changed. You can learn to become more optimistic in your style of thinking. Martin Seligman, an eminent psychologist and author of *Learned Optimism* (1991), has to battle with his own pessimistic outlook:

I am not a default optimist. I am a dyed-in-the-wool pessimist; I believe that only pessimists can write sober and sensible books about optimism, and I use the techniques that I wrote about in *Learned Optimism* every day. I take my own medicine, and it works for me.
(2003: 24)

One of the techniques he uses to start changing his pessimistic explanatory style is the ABC model that I discussed in the previous chapter.

- **A = activating event or adversity**
- **B = beliefs**
- **C = consequences** – emotional and behavioural.

For example, if you fail to successfully assemble a flat-pack bookcase (A) and feel despair and anger, and throw the pieces into the dustbin (C),

you might believe (B) ‘I can never do anything right. I’m completely useless.’ This belief puts you in the dustbin along with the self-assembly pieces. In contrast, optimistic beliefs are balanced, flexible and realistic (not feel-good bromides), and point out the dangers of using words like ‘never’ and ‘useless’ in assessing yourself and/or your abilities as they create the dispiriting impression of unchangeability in your life.

Seligman (1991) made the case for flexible optimism because there might be specific situations where a pessimistic explanatory style might be more appropriate than an optimistic one, helping you to avoid the high risks you may be running. For example, if you’ve been drinking, you’d be wise to assume that you’ll be stopped by the police and take a cab instead; if you’re tempted to plagiarize material to put into your college assignment, you’d assume you’ll be found out by your tutor; and if you lie about your achievements on your CV, you’d assume this will be discovered by your prospective employer. And, on a grimmer note, James Stockdale, the POW we met in Chapter 2, pointed out that those prisoners who didn’t return from the camps were optimists. Year after year, their hopes that release was just around the corner, such as at Christmas or Easter, were continually dashed. ‘I think they all died of broken hearts’ (quoted in Coutu, 2003: 7).

Undermined, but not for ever

In this chapter, I’ve looked at some of the attitudes that undermine resilience building and suggested ways of replacing them with resilience-oriented attitudes. This transition can be slow and difficult and it’s easy to give up and fall back into familiar, but self-defeating, attitudes and actions. Change is possible no matter how long you’ve been stuck in your ways, but the starting point is a willingness to be open to discussing new ideas and trying out some different behaviours if you want to develop a resilient outlook. This is the subject of the next chapter.