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The impact of resilience among older adults

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this literature review was to provide an overview of resilience for the purpose of informing potential intervention designs that may benefit older adults. While numerous reviews have focused on various specific aspects of resilience, none have provided the necessary information required to design an effective resilience intervention. Research examining resilience suggests that older adults are capable of high resilience despite socioeconomic backgrounds, personal experiences, and declining health. Thus opportunities to inform interventions in this area exist. Research studies have identified the common mental, social, and physical characteristics associated with resilience. High resilience has also been significantly associated with positive outcomes, including successful aging, lower depression, and longevity. Interventions to enhance resilience within this population are warranted, but little evidence of success exists. Thus this review provides an overview of resilience that may aid in the design of resilience interventions for the often underserved population of older adults.

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Introduction

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress,” or “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.¹ The APA’s definition of a *process* versus a stable *personality trait* (often termed *resiliency*) suggests that people have the capacity to build and demonstrate resilience, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, personal experiences, or social environments. The debate surrounding resilience as a process versus a trait persists as a research topic, but the more common perspective emphasizes an adaptive process that can be developed.^{2–5}

Most studies of resilience have focused on at-risk children, adolescents, and military veterans who have had prolonged exposure to trauma, difficult sociodemographic environments, or other chronic stressors.⁶ The focus among these various populations has been primarily on suicide risk. Yet with the increased graying of the

population, a growing field of research has emerged on the concept of resilience among older adults and its role in successful aging. Successful aging has several components but is typically defined as freedom from chronic disease and disability, as well as high physical and mental functioning.⁷ Adults age 65 years and older are currently the fastest growing age group in the US, dominated by Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), with adults age 80 years and older growing most rapidly. In fact, US Census Bureau population data predict that by 2030, adults age 65 years and older will make up nearly 20% of the US population.⁸ As such, there is growing interest in helping Baby Boomers reach old age with optimal health and minimal disability. Traditionally, in many Western cultures older age has been viewed negatively as a time of frailty, disability, declining function, and greater physical and mental limitations.^{9–11} However, many older adults actually experience high wellbeing and quality of life, low stress, recovery from adversities, and consider themselves to be aging successfully despite the onset of chronic conditions.^{7,9–12} In some studies, adults age 85 and older appear to have the same or greater capacity for resilience as those who are younger,^{10,12–14} suggesting that resilience may also support longevity.

To date, resilience has been primarily a research topic. Researchers have developed numerous scales to measure resilience with different populations.¹⁵ Several common characteristics of

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resilience among older adults have been identified, including mental, social, and physical components,^{5,7,10,11,13,14,16–23} indicating that resilience is multi-dimensional. High resilience later in life has been associated with optimal outcomes, such as reduced depression and mortality risk,^{6,7,9,13,16,24–26} as well as better self-perceptions of aging successfully,^{7,25,27} increased quality of life, and improved lifestyle behaviors.^{6,7,9,12,16,21,22,26}

The purpose of this review is to provide an overview of resilience to inform the design of interventions for older adults. This review will examine 1) definitions and measurement scales of resilience; 2) characteristics associated with resilience; 3) positive outcomes; and 4) existing intervention strategies and/or programs to promote resilience.

Methods

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A review of resilience scientific literature indicated no current intervention studies that provided an adequate template for a planned intervention. Thus the purpose of this review was to summarize what is currently known about resilience and to understand what aspects of the construct could be used to inform potential interventions for older adults—currently not often a target for resilience research. Search methods were restricted in order to meet that specific purpose. Online search engines, primarily PubMed, Medline, Google Scholar, and a mainstream Google search, as well as reference lists of relevant articles, were utilized to identify reviews and research studies of resilience among older adult populations. Across these sources, the search focused on articles reporting relevant studies using variations of multiple search terms and phrases, including: *resilience*, *resilience among older adults*, *resilience and seniors*, *resilience and Medicare*, as well as similar combinations of these terms. In addition, search terms related to specific aspects of resilience were included, such as the following topics: *definitions of resilience/defining resilience*, *prevalence of high resilience*, *resilience and health outcomes/outcomes of high resilience*, *characteristics of resilience*, *measuring resilience/measurements of resilience*, *resilience scales*, *developing resilience*, *identifying resilience*, *older women and resilience/resilient older women*, and *resilience interventions/resilience initiatives/resilience programs*.

Results of search

Among the reviews and research studies identified focusing on older adult populations, the majority of articles were published during 2005 or later. A few selected articles providing standard definitions or early groundbreaking work in resilience published earlier were included, such as those from the early 2000s or very late 1990s. Studies conducted in the US as well as international research were considered, although only those published in English. Regarding specific studies describing intervention design and implementation, few interventions focused on older adults with designed evaluations were identified, most of inferior quality lacking rigorous design, implementation, or evaluations. Furthermore, most studies described interventions in development or in informal settings with very small study populations, supplemented with discussions focused on strategies that could be effective in this area rather than programmatic elements per se. Selected studies with smaller study samples that demonstrated promise were included for completion.

The following is a listing of the number of articles for each topic returned through searching PubMed; each search topic included

several specific search terms and phrases. For brevity, only the results from PubMed are described here as it was the primary resource used and provided the vast majority of relevant papers: *Resilience: 945; Definitions and Prevalence: 623; Characteristics: 1097; Outcomes: 1129; Measurements: 1078; and Interventions and Programs: 1193.*

After a focused review of the articles most relevant to meet the criteria for our intended purpose, the final number of references ultimately included totals 55, with 45 articles published 2005 to present (available at the time of the search) and the remaining 10 published in 2004 or earlier. Although there was clearly some overlap between topics, with all references falling into the general topic of resilience, a distribution of the number of final references selected is shown below for each of the more specific major categories: *Resilience: 9; Definitions and Prevalence: 7; Characteristics: 14; Outcomes: 10; Measurements: 8; and Interventions and Programs: 7.*

Finally, the search for relevant papers describing proposed resilience interventions or programs relied on a 2010 review of interventions along with updated single research studies; none of the intervention programs reached the level of randomized control studies.

Definitions and measurement scales

Various types and definitions of resilience have been described in the literature, as resilience is applied in different contexts similar to how constructs such as wellbeing are used. For the purpose of this review, establishing a definition of the resilience construct was critical to our purpose. The APA's definition as an adaptive process versus a stable personality trait has been generally accepted as a standard definition of resilience. Elsewhere, resilience has been explained as adaptation in the presence of an adversity or loss; an outcome following a stressful event.²⁸ Resilience has also been defined as the ability to maintain healthy psychological functioning during exposure to stressful life events,²⁹ the ability to retain physical or emotional health after a loss,³⁰ and resistance to psychological disorders while facing stress or trauma.³¹ Several descriptions of resilience are similar to the APA's definition: bouncing back following adversity¹⁴; the adaptive capacity to maintain independent functioning and wellbeing³²; negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant stressors or traumas³³; a pattern of functioning that demonstrates adaptation despite adversity^{3,5}; and possession of perseverance, competence, strength, and protective processes.³⁴

Tools designed to measure resilience are based on the common characteristics aligned with these definitions.^{12–14,16,18,25,30,33,35–37} A comprehensive review of resilience scales suggested that the Brief Resilience Scale, Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), and Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA) potentially have the best psychometric ratings and strongest measurement qualities of those studied (Table 1).¹⁵ Nevertheless, in this review, Windle et al determined no true “gold standard” of the measures they evaluated.¹⁵ Furthermore no more recent reviews of resilience scales to update Windle et al (2011) or to identify a gold standard measure of resilience from more recent publications were identified.

Levels of resilience

Resilience is generally defined by selected criteria to establish measures of high or low levels; thus it is appropriate to focus on high resilience and the characteristics associated with definitions of high levels of resilience. The levels of resilience among older adults vary depending upon the population examined and measurement scale used; high resilience has been reported in the range

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