The purpose of these notes is to help you face some challenge in your life, big or small, by putting you back in touch with your own resilience. The strength you need to face difficulties is not just inside you. It lies in your relationships, what you give and receive from people you care about. It also lies in the kindness of ‘ordinary’ people you meet every the many resources in your wider world. Knowing how to connect with all of those resources will give you the confidence to believe that the outcome you hope for can happen.

What is resilience?

The word resilience, from the Latin word ‘resilire’, refers to the ability to bounce back. An object is resilient when it springs back into shape after being squashed or stretched. Economies, communities, ecosystems and organisations are resilient when they recover their form after some disruption. With human beings, the word has a slightly different meaning. Resilience is what helps us when life takes a turn for the worse. We may bounce back, but we may also bounce forward. When we survive some crisis or upheaval in our life, we are never quite the same again. We are changed by that experience. We grow and learn something that may be helpful to others.

Where did our interest in resilience come from?

In the early part of the 20th century, Psychology gathered around the crib and looked to the child for answers to some profound about human development. They wanted to establish whether there was a connection between our experience in early childhood and the physical and mental health difficulties we experience later in our lives.

The answer was a resounding ‘Yes’. What we experience as children affects how we feel about ourselves as adults, how we form relationships, and how we manage our physical and emotional lives. Those studies gave us a fresh appreciation for the importance of the early life of the child and to do all we can to safeguard the child, the mother and the family in those tender years.

It’s taking a while to turn those early 20th century insights into policies and resources that give families the material supports they need to make the most of those years. Mothers and carers, family support agencies and teachers, and the civil servants and politicians who shape the social environment in which families live, are our true front line mental health service providers. It is for the rest of us to see, as John Whitehead said, that “children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.”

While it is true that adversity in early life has a profound impact on us as adults, that’s not the whole story. In the later part of the 20th century attention turned to children raised in the worst of circumstances, including those orphaned during the war, incarcerated in death camps, and those raised in severely disadvantaged communities. While most of these children has wounds that never seemed to heal, there were consistently about a third of these children who went on to flourish as adults. Psychology woke up to the fact that our history did not have to be our destiny. We are vulnerable but there is also a potential to recover from adversity. The focus of research in recent years has been to understand our capacity to recover and to identify the key ingredients of resilience. In the 1960’s psychology set about trying to identify what protects us when we are confronted with major losses or disruptions in our lives. What is it that allows one person to emerge from a crisis and be more fully themselves (more creative, humorous, able to form meaningful relationships), whilst someone else feels crushed and remains stuck in the past, frozen in time? What builds resilience?

Anna Freud was probably the first to spot that the answer does not lie exclusively in the individual. She took children who were very damaged into her Hampstead Nursery during the second world war, and observed them very closely over a long period. She found that the difference between those who thrived and those who
didn’t could not be accounted for individual characteristics. Resilience was in all of these children but it needed a helping hand. Recovery also depended of changing the world of that child, to allow them to thrive. Placing them in better social circumstances, opening up opportunities for them to learn played a big part in their ‘resilience’. Recovery and growth happen when we match the right external supports to each child’s internal capacities.

In a recent interview with the Guardian, Lucy Hone, Director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience, with a Ted talk on resilience watched by over one million viewers, said:

“Resilience comes from nature, nurture and culture. I think it is important to think of it from those three different levels. It’s all very well expecting individuals to be responsible for their own resilience, but it doesn’t take into account huge external factors such as social inequalities, structural racism or underfunded support services.”

This makes an important point as the term resilience is sometimes used in a very judgmental way when we’re talking about people’s reaction to any challenge or setback in their lives, such as Covid-19. As though one is somehow a better, more responsible, more ‘resilient’ person for having coped than someone who was crushed by the experienced. Both may have had the exact same potential for resilience but where one person had space, no financial worries, no loss of loved ones, or livelihood, the other person may have not been so fortunate.

So how can we turn all of the above observations and research into something useful to help us face shocks and setbacks in our lives? It’s probably true that most of us would wish we had a little more resilience in our lives.

Let’s recap:

- **Our history doesn’t have to become our destiny. But it can do. What makes the difference are a number of elements in our lives working together that collectively we call ‘resilience’**

- **Resilience is the strength inside us and around us that helps when our lives take a turn for the worse. Resilience draws on what life has already taught us about survival and facing hardship. It includes the support we can give and get from each other, and resources in the wider community that make our lives a little easier.**

- **Resilience is a process of becoming, not overcoming. We are changed as we face each new challenge in our lives and grow through it. Every time we survive, we become more fully ourselves.**

**My Resilience Story**

We all have a resilience story. We wouldn’t be here now if we hadn’t survived different challenges and sorrows we’ve had to face in our lives. But ask yourself: “What did living though and surviving that experience show me about myself? Perhaps I discovered an inner strength I didn’t know I had. Perhaps I realized for the first time how kind people are? Perhaps it opened my eyes to how vulnerable everyone is, no matter how ‘together’ they may appear.

Chris Johnstone (details below) has a very unique approach to resilience that he calls ‘Storyboarding’. I find this a very useful way to ‘call up’ my resilience when I’m faced with any challenge in my life, no matter how small or how serious it may be. Here’s how it works:

We can think of resilience as a story that unfolds across different chapters. The key insight that Chris offers is that "whatever situation we face, no matter how awful, there are always different ways it can work out." His ‘story’ of resilience begins from the moment we are faced with something difficult in our lives and proceeds through a number of steps we can take to achieve if not the perfect ending to the story, at least a ‘better than expected outcome’. Every time we face a difficult situation, think of resilience as something you do rather
than something you have. Ask yourself: “What would a story of resilience look like here?” and see where that takes you.

1. Here’s me facing ...

Like any great story, resilience often begins at a point in our lives when we feel weak, and ill-equipped for the challenge we are faced with. Frodo was nobody special. He was small with big feet, living a very organised and safe life in Hobbitville; Harry had a confused sense of identity. He didn’t know who he was and lived under the stairs. Neither one impressed initially as being any kind of hero. Their resilience story was everything that only emerged as their lives were disrupted. Their story is a story of emerging resilience as they searched for the courage, the skills, the allies and the opportunities they would need to turn a major tragedy into the best possible outcome.

Our resilience story begins as we realise there is something difficult, uncomfortable, we need to face. Chapter one of our story is titled “Here’s me facing this ...” Each of us can ask ourselves “What is it I am facing that feels more than I can cope with?” Perhaps it’s the tiredness I’m feeling after the year I’ve had; Perhaps it’s some loss that’s left me feeling heartbroken; Maybe I’m already in the middle of facing some painful issue; or perhaps what I have to face in in my future; perhaps it’s Christmas. This is not an easy place for me to be, but its where I start from.

Denial can protect us from becoming aware of what we may need to face, and for a while that’s OK. But generally we don’t get away with pushing things to the back of our minds forever. What we need to find in ourselves the courage that the poet Emily Dickinson recognised in each of us when she wrote:

“What fortitude the soul contains that it can so endure, 
the accent of a coming foot, the opening of a door.”

So, in his storyboard exercise, Chris has us write down in the first box, some challenge or difficulty that we have to face (See blank storyboard exercise below).

Naming what is troubling us can make it more ‘real’. We may become emotional when we look at what we’ve written down. Our emotions may feel churned up and need time to settle. It’s hard to think clearly about anything when you’re all churned up inside. Maybe you need a walk, or a few deep breaths or a chat with someone you trust, before going any further. That’s fine. Do what you need to do to allow your mind to settle and come back when you’re ready.

2. Hoped for outcome ...

When we can think clearly, the university of Pennsylvania Resilience programme invites us to answer two questions as we get ready to deal with any difficult issue.

1) What’s the best that can happen here?

2) What’s the worst that can happen here?

It’s possible, but unlikely, that the issues I’m facing will work out as perfectly as I’d like them to. It’s also possible - but unlikely - that they will have work out as badly as I fear they might. So, it is worth thinking about what would be a better-than-expected outcome for me, for everyone, in terms of this issue I’m facing? This is the next thing I write down.

3. What helps here is ...

What helps a lot when facing any challenge is to focus on things we can do rather than what we can’t control. What we focus on may be very small steps that are within our ability to take at this time. They won’t make the problem go away, but they will change how we feel in ourselves and help us to face what is difficult. When we take control in even the smallest way, we feel hugely relieved. Doing something rather than nothing always feels better.
In terms of what’s helpful, research has identified ‘Reaching out and making contact’ to be the strongest predictor of achieving a good outcome in any crisis. People with networks of support do better than people who battle alone. If you cannot reach out to someone in person, you may be able to reach out in your imagination. Picture someone in your life that believed in you, encouraged you, loved you. Imagine them looking at you now as you face this challenge in your life. What would he or she say to you now? What would they do?

Research has also shown that making a habit of remembering the better times in the past day or week helps us survive dark times in our lives. What was one of my favourite moments in the past week? Gratitude works in a number of ways to strengthen resilience. It creates positive emotions, that have the power to ‘undo’, break up, negative states of mind. Gratitude also changes how we look at the world generally. By paying attention to “our favourite moment” today, we bring a more hopeful mind-set to tomorrow. Our brains are naturally biased in the direction of looking for what wrong in our lives, what’s missing. Gratitude retrains our brains to scan for what is good.

So when your life takes a turn for the worse, think about what helps you to face what is difficult. What helps me to think more clearly? What calms me down? Maybe it’s a pet. Maybe its exercise. Maybe it’s a friend who accepts me. Or a phrase that steadies and energises me?

- “Start from where you are” – Pema Chodron;
- “Is what I’m doing helping me or harming me?” (Lucy Hone)
- “One step at a time” (AA)

Poetry is often what people turn to in the face of major upheavals in their lives.

“Though we live in a world that dreams of ending,  
That always seems about to give in  
Something that will not acknowledge conclusion  
insists that we forever begin” (Brendan Kennelly)

“I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness  
the astonishing light of your own being”. (Hafiz)

“I’ve got all my life to give and all my love to give,  
I will survive, I will survive ...” (Gloria Gaynor)

Grand opera, the Nolan sisters, or Gloria Gaynor at full volume in your care after dropping off the kids it can be very freeing when we are tied up in knots inside. Music, Max Richter, the composer, says,” creates a place where we can think”.

**What builds resilience?**

- Self-compassion

What resilience doesn’t look like is toughening up, not crying, soldiering on, stiff upper lip,” says Lucy Hone. “It involves all emotions – it can involve anger and tears, lying in bed one day and saying: ‘I just can’t do this.’ Sometimes people think of resilience as ‘try harder’, ‘knuckle down’, I think a better question to ask is "What helps us do that"? Sometimes trying harder doesn’t help. Easing off, taking a break might be a better idea.
today. People cope better with stress when they punctuate is with pauses, to renew themselves. Self-compassion is a form of resilience.

- **Hope**

Hope is a feeling that our lives are a gift and that this world, despite the violence and exploitation we see every day, is a place where good things can happen. Hope is not about the future. It’s about believing in the possibilities that exist in the present. It is not passive - it is about choosing to engage with life, to face what is difficult, and to commit to doing whatever it takes to help make what is hoped-for happen.

- **Starting early**

Giving your child the experience of completing routine, but important chores successfully, builds their confidence and stamina. For example, allow them to help unload the dishwasher, hand you pegs as you hang clothes out to dry. Helping them also to learn to read social situations and learn to think flexibly about what response might be appropriate. Teaching children to be flexible, to use what they have to solve the problems they encounter, is teaching them the fundamental skills of resilience.

- **Learning to pace yourself:**

Progress may be slower than we would like it to be. The important thing is the direction we move in. Asking ourselves: ‘What helps me have a better day rather than a worse day’? Maybe having a few simple routines, we repeat every day that helps put some shape on the day. Maybe setting one or two goals that make us feel we are taking back even a small piece of control.
Final thoughts:

Whatever you face, think of this: What’s the best that can happen? what’s the worst that can happen? How can I make this story work out in a way I can live with? The challenge of resilience is to play a part in the story that makes that hoped for ending more likely to happen.

**My Resilience Story**

| 1. Here’s me facing .... |  |
| (Describe the challenge you are facing) |
| 2. Hoped for outcome ... |  |
| (Describe what you’d like to see happen) |
| 3. What helps here is ... |  |
| (Describe what could help you to deal with this challenge) |

**References**

Chris Johnstone, Seven Ways to Build Resilience (2019) Robinson