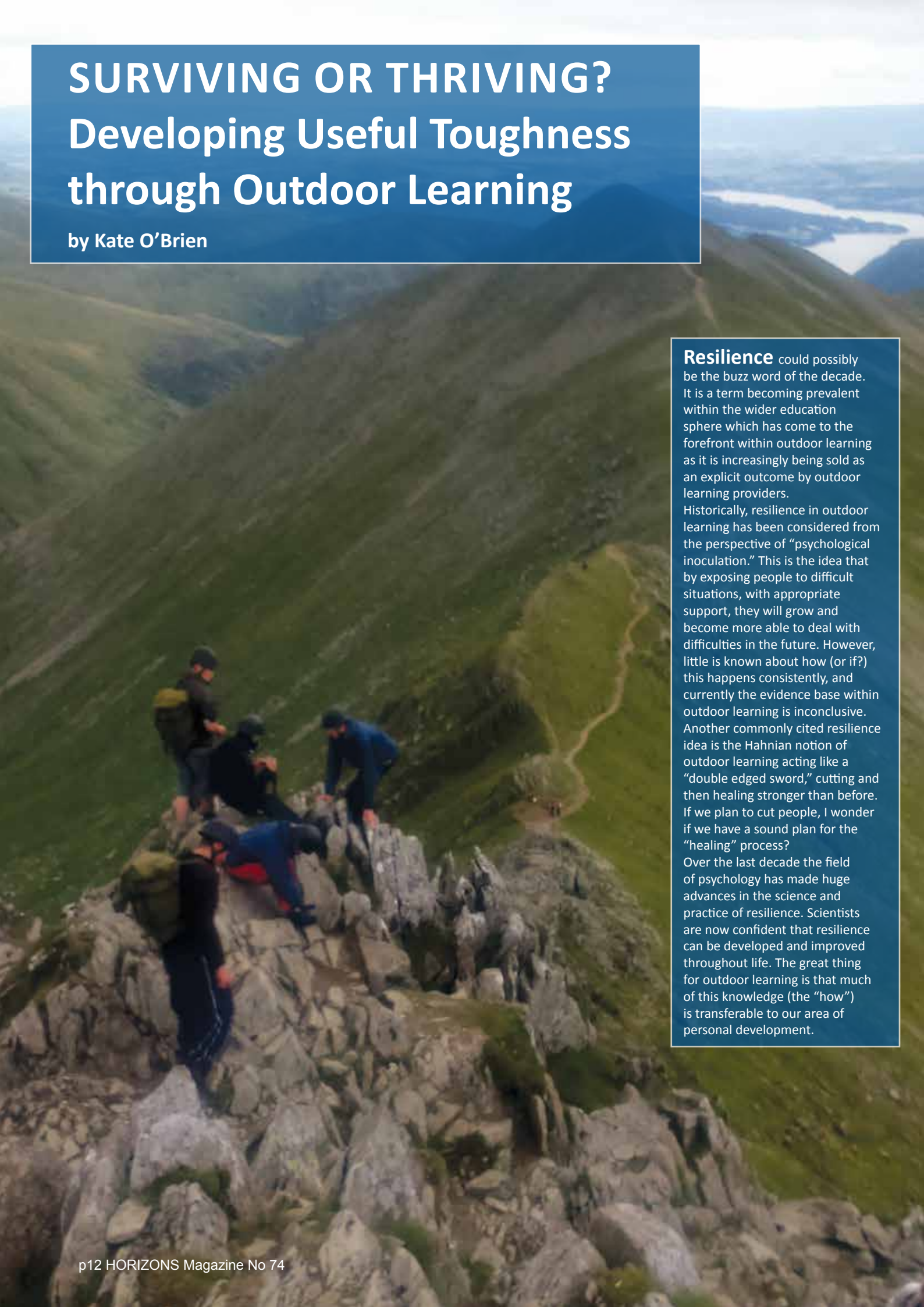


A group of people are seen from behind, climbing a steep, rocky mountain ridge. They are wearing outdoor gear like backpacks and hats. The landscape is rugged with green grass and grey rocks. In the distance, a valley with a river or lake is visible under a hazy sky.

SURVIVING OR THRIVING?

Developing Useful Toughness through Outdoor Learning

by Kate O'Brien

Resilience could possibly be the buzz word of the decade. It is a term becoming prevalent within the wider education sphere which has come to the forefront within outdoor learning as it is increasingly being sold as an explicit outcome by outdoor learning providers. Historically, resilience in outdoor learning has been considered from the perspective of "psychological inoculation." This is the idea that by exposing people to difficult situations, with appropriate support, they will grow and become more able to deal with difficulties in the future. However, little is known about how (or if?) this happens consistently, and currently the evidence base within outdoor learning is inconclusive. Another commonly cited resilience idea is the Hahnian notion of outdoor learning acting like a "double edged sword," cutting and then healing stronger than before. If we plan to cut people, I wonder if we have a sound plan for the "healing" process? Over the last decade the field of psychology has made huge advances in the science and practice of resilience. Scientists are now confident that resilience can be developed and improved throughout life. The great thing for outdoor learning is that much of this knowledge (the "how") is transferable to our area of personal development.

What is resilience and what does it mean for outdoor learning?

‘Resilience is the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaption despite challenging or threatening circumstances.’¹

There are some key skills identified by research which can be focused on within outdoor learning. These themes are hugely useful when considering the detail of resilience, and in discussing the concept with participants, visiting staff or colleagues. Resilience is about:

1. Applying **effort** when challenges are no longer easy (mental or physical).
2. Using **imagination to develop different strategies** when you are not succeeding (Trying again... but differently). This is fundamentally different to simply trying again the same way.
3. Recognising the **impact of different ways of thinking** on likelihood of applying effort and trying new strategies, and being able to **imagine alternatives**. Psychologists² describe the 3Ps of Permanence, Pervasiveness and Personalisation. Resilient people tend to have a realistic perspective on how long challenges will affect them for, whether they will only affect that one area of their life or pervade many aspects, and how much an event relates to them personally.
4. Continuing to apply effort and imagination **over time**, during **change** and when **under stress (Perseverance)**.
5. Being able to access **support** networks to enable adaptation in challenging situations.

Resilient responses can range from surviving to thriving. Surviving equates to just getting through something. If people are unmanageably scared or pushed too far, for too long, without time to adapt and process, they may act impulsively to escape the stressor or shut down. Ultimately all they may have learnt is how horrible the experience was, and potentially some really negative lessons about the outdoors, exercise and other people. Thriving happens when people are able to access creative thinking to find adaptive coping strategies and regulate their emotional responses to allow them to continue to use skills to effectively complete the challenge. This is when people learn effective and life enhancing lessons.

So what can we do to promote thriving? And how can we help individuals to learn more transferable lessons about their own resilience?

Research³ suggests that there are 5 factors which promote thriving:

- Appropriate Level of Challenge.
- Relatively open ended experiences.
- Choice.
- Intrinsic Motivation.
- Personal Support.

Two key areas to consider are **programming** and **facilitation**. Programming includes the decisions you make about what adventures you choose to make up a programme, in what order and also decisions you make within an adventure. Facilitation includes what you choose to focus on throughout the session and during reviews. These are kept separate to recognise that depending on your role, you may have more or less ownership in each area.

Programming

PROFILING - Choose activities to do early on which will allow you to assess where participants are at (e.g. a small summit may tell you more than a low level nature walk, problem solving tasks which can be made progressively harder may tell you more than ones which are too easy, or over too quickly). Consciously observe students’ responses to challenge, application of effort, ability to try different strategies and persevere.

SUSTAINED CHALLENGE - Provide opportunities for people to experience some sustained challenge. Be okay with participants’ struggle, don’t rescue, but see it as a sign to facilitate useful conversations about ways of thinking, coping strategies and support. There is a fine balance between providing valuable sustained challenge and pushing people into survival mode. Often there is a point of difficulty which (with good facilitation) people will work through into thriving. Learning to recognise this, and knowing when to stop is a skill which can be developed through paying attention to and reflecting on experience.

EXTENSION/REDUCTION OPTIONS - Plan with extension/reduction options so you can gauge level of challenge during the adventure and adapt appropriately (e.g. an extra summit from a campsite or a variety of difficulties during a climbing session).

REPETITION – Offer a chance to try something again. Often this works well after a discussion sharing individuals’ strategies so people are trying again... but differently. This could be as simple as making time to offer two goes on a high challenge activity.

PROGRESSION AND APPLICATION - use of skills in more difficult conditions. Train skills – Apply skills – Stress-proof skills (e.g. a canoe skills session leading to a journey).

ALLOW TIME - for genuine ownership. Part of building up resilience involves letting people do things for themselves (even when this takes MUCH longer!) You may choose a shorter, less technical gorge, to allow students to lead, monitor progress and make mistakes. First Attempt In Learning is a useful acronym when facilitating learning from mistakes.

Facilitation

DISCUSS AND NORMALISE SURVIVAL RESPONSE – Delve deeper into the standard

Comfort Zones model. Do something early on which may provoke an anxiety response. This allows you to discuss this. What is challenge like? What do you see/hear/feel/think? Do those things help you succeed? What options do you have? What things in your real life make you feel like this? What benefits would you gain from being able to manage challenging situations? Often the physiological response described is similar e.g. heart racing, butterflies, nervous/excited, sweating, “two voices in my head,” but how people interpret that can be vastly different, often leading to big differences in behavioural choices and performance. Sharing and normalising the response helps people to understand that it is part of being human. Discussing how different people think and deal with challenge emphasises that there are many different alternatives, some more helpful than others in terms of succeeding. This is a really useful foundation for discussing challenge and choices throughout the course.

CHALLENGE BY CHOICE – Real choice enhances intrinsic motivation, where the drive to engage comes from within. For this to be effective it is important that participants feel they have a genuine choice and are not being coerced or pressured towards the “right” choice. Some adventures make this more possible than others (e.g. where there are different levels of jump into a gorge, or different elements on a high challenge course). In facilitation terms, your language and behaviour contributes to whether or not participants will feel choices as genuine. The group will also influence how choices are perceived by what is accepted and supported. You can influence this in terms of how you build up the group dynamic throughout the course.

The reality of creating genuine choices within a programme can depend on the activities you have available and staffing. When possible consider how you could use an extra member of staff to offer genuine choice. Factoring this into your planning can be a really powerful way to individualise learning and share the effects of different choices within the group.

FACILITATE GROUP SUPPORT – In the research, access to support has been highlighted as a key factor in developing resilience. We often work on group support to enable individual challenge during the course. Helping participants to identify support networks for particular challenges back at home is a great way to ensure that this key element is transferred to real life.

FACILITATION STYLES – Striking the balance of impelling, supporting, coaching participants and offering genuine choice is challenging. If you know why you’re doing what you are doing, you are more likely to be effective. It’s important to create enough experiences where participants see, feel and do things they didn’t think were possible. This gives them the faith that it is worth it, the knowledge that they have more within

them than they thought, and thereby the impetus to make more challenging choices. The key here is knowing when to provide personal support, when to coach participants on effective strategies, when to facilitate discussion/support from others, when to use reflective exercises to raise self-awareness and when to offer genuine choice.

LOOK FOR INDICATORS – Observe application of effort, imagination (strategies and ways of thinking) and perseverance. What language are they using? This is one of the strongest indicators. How are they behaving? Are any patterns emerging? Are there any changes in language/behaviour or what they say/write/draw in reviews? Ask good questions and talk to individuals.

BE EXPLICIT ABOUT RESILIENCE – For many young people resilience is a word that they hear lots, but when asked many don't actually know what it means. Time spent explicitly teaching the four themes above and contextualising them in the days' adventures can be very effective.

USE TECHNIQUES WHICH ALLOW PARTICIPANTS TO SHARE HOW CHALLENGED THEY FEEL BEFORE OR DURING ADVENTURES

– Active reviews can be great for this e.g. High/low physical ratings, finger ratings, challenge line on the ground or scores out of 10. These type of activities are a great indicator for you, but also allow discussion of

strategies, thinking styles and support. Taking time to do these things during adventures can allow participants to recalibrate and can make the difference between surviving and thriving. If your group are influenced by peers into choosing to give what they deem to be socially appropriate answers use strategies like eyes closed, secret post its, or 1:1 chats.

REVIEWS – Reviews which focus on effort/reward or coping strategies work really well to develop resilience. Here are three favourites. The first is facilitated before a prolonged adventure. Draw out the journey on two bits of flipchart (or in gravel/sand/nature if you want an outdoor version). In two groups participants identify what they are looking forward to/benefits of the upcoming experience as well as what some of the challenges might be. They then swap pictures, read their teammates thoughts and become strategy detectives for that groups challenges. So if for example, the team have written "it's a really long way" as a challenge, the strategy detective team might write something like, "plan regular breaks" or "make sure we eat and drink enough so we have energy." At the end you can facilitate a discussion about how the team will manage the upcoming

challenge to ensure they are successful and get the most out of it. As the answers have come from them, they tend to effectively apply them during the challenge and can see that they have the resources within them to manage.

The second is also a pictorial mountain review, but takes place after a challenge, highlighting highs, lows, strategies and achievements all drawn on to a picture of their journey. This usually allows you to connect success with effort and strategies, which can be transferable to new challenges.

The third involves keeping an on-going strategies bank or suitcase, drawn on flipchart throughout the course. It can also include helpful thinking styles and (on the outside) where these could be used in the future.

In Conclusion

If resilience is approached in a conscious and sophisticated manner it is possible that participants will leave our courses not just knowing they have got through something difficult, but actually thinking differently. With a knowledge and practice of different coping strategies, coupled with a fresh perspective on the value of effort they will be well equipped to adapt and succeed in the future. ■





THE
OUTWARD
BOUND TRUST

What is Resilience?

Keeping
Going

Work through
tough situations
Strategies to adapt

Effort

Why is Resilience important
to you?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate studied Outdoor Education in the Community at Strathclyde University before working at a number of centres and programmes within the UK and abroad. She has worked in personal development for 14 years, with some time out here and there to travel and pursue personal adventures. Kate recently completed a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology and is passionate about enhancing practice by implementing learning from this widely researched area.



Photos: from the author