

Strategies to Increase Personal Resilience in Disaster Response Effort¹

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Introduction

Personal resilience can be defined as reducing stress and increasing coping abilities in traumatic situations (Maddi, 2013). It consists of hardy attitudes that contribute to effectively dealing with stressful situations (Maddi, 2013). These attitudes are broken down into challenge, commitment, and control. Challenge refers to continuous learning from past experiences as opposed to feelings of stagnation. Commitment is the ability to stay connected with others as opposed to feelings of alienation. Control is striving to achieve influence over stressful situations as opposed to feelings of powerlessness. A person must have strength in all three hardy attitudes to thrive in difficult situations (Maddi, 2004; Maddi, 2013).

Personal resilience should be an important consideration for Cooperative Extension because some agents have emergency support functions and are involved in hurricane, fires, floods, and other disaster response efforts. Some Extension agents in disaster response roles are also affiliated with their State Agricultural Response Team. As such, they should be prepared to engage in disaster recovery efforts (Eighmy et al., 2012). However, past research showed that agents affected by hurricanes and coping with personal losses were not well prepared to deal with job demands or provide client support (Telg et al., 2008). This publication highlights strategies to help Extension professionals increase their personal resilience in disaster response efforts.

Definition of Personal Resilience

Figure 1, further discussed in Ali (2019), describes a researcher-developed framework for determining the level of personal resilience among agents.

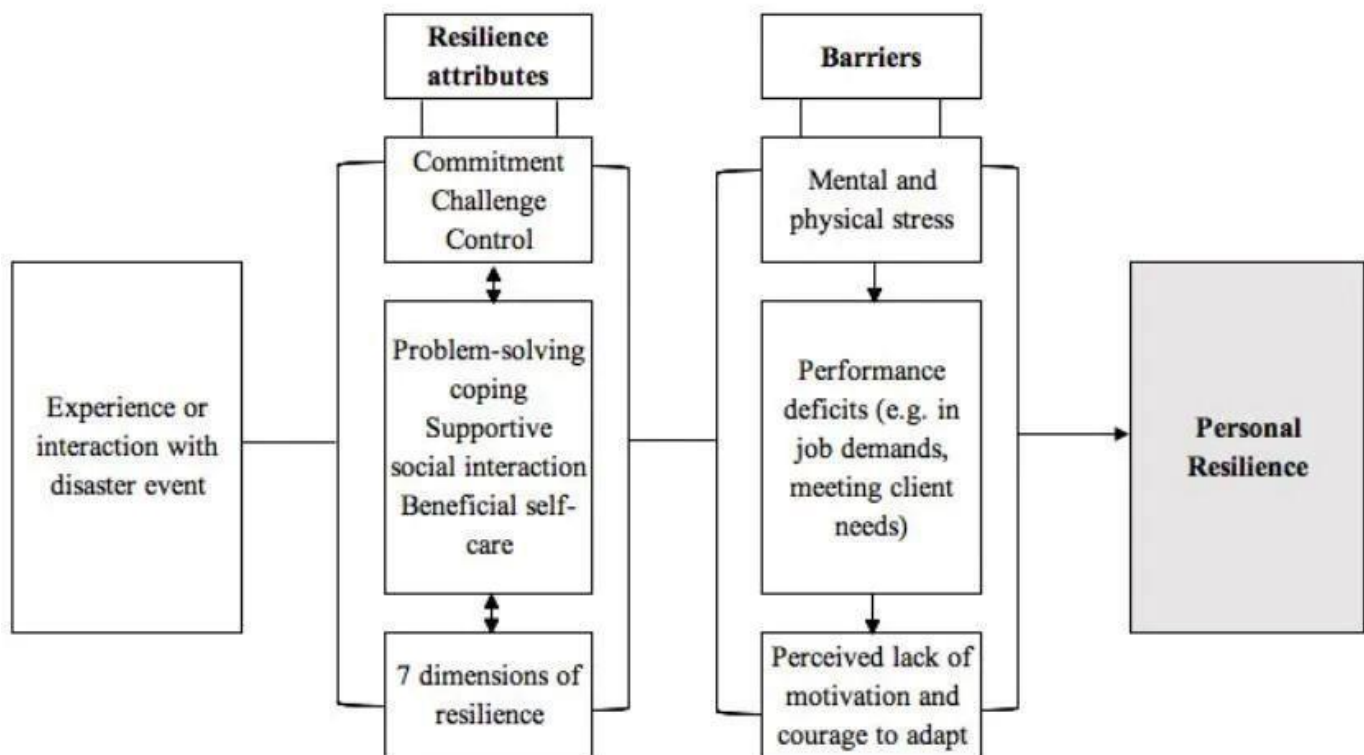


Figure 1. Researcher-developed resilience conceptual framework for determining UF/IFAS Extension agents' level of personal resilience in post-disaster response.

Overall, the framework shows resilience attributes (hardy attitudes, hardy strategies, and the seven dimensions of resilience) and perceived barriers to personal resilience. While resilience attributes strengthen personal resilience, factors such as mental and physical stress, performance deficits, and perceived lack of motivation and courage to adapt to the situation hinder the process of improving personal resilience. These components are important for effective disaster response as agents act as front-line responders, providing disaster support and assisting in recovery efforts (Kistler et al., 2006).

Extension agents should be familiar with the seven dimensions of resilience (Resilience Alliance, 2013). Each dimension contributes to coping abilities in stressful events. A resilient individual possesses all seven traits and can apply any dimension of resilience to cope with adverse situations. The seven dimensions of resilience are

- *Positive worldview*—The ability to effectively recognize opportunities during crises (e.g., I can identify ways to have an optimistic outlook in my disaster response role).
- *Positive self*—The perceived ability and confidence to succeed in stressful circumstances (e.g., I am confident I can meet my clients' needs after a disaster).

- *Focused*—A clear vision of strategies for achieving desired outcomes and an ability to execute those strategies, even when disoriented (e.g., I know what my role is in disaster response and how to engage effectively in that role).
- *Flexible thought*—The ability to produce a range of strategies as a mechanism for responding to change (e.g., I can come up with creative ways to address my clients' needs).
- *Flexible social*—The ability to connect easily with others for support and assistance during change (e.g., I find it easy to connect with others for support during crises).
- *Organized*—The ability to effectively develop and apply systems, processes, and structures when dealing with change (e.g., I am prepared to deal with my clients' needs).
- *Proactive*—The ability to initiate action and engage in calculated risks when facing uncertainty (e.g., I can assess the situation and come up with my own ideas to help my clients).

Research Focusing on Natural Disasters in Florida

This research focused on UF/IFAS Extension agents who were involved in response efforts following Hurricane Irma in 2017. Nine UF/IFAS Extension agents from various counties across Florida were interviewed about how they coped with their disaster responsibilities. Agents showed high levels of continuous learning (challenge), medium levels of control over stressful situations, and medium-high levels of connecting with others (commitment). However, they exhibited low-medium levels of having a clear vision of what to do (focused), suggesting a lack of clarity in roles and expectations when engaged in disaster response. When asked about coping abilities, agents experienced some inability to balance personal and professional demands. They felt fatigued and likely experienced high levels of mental and emotional stress, probably resulting in a perceived inability to meet job requirements. These results likely lowered agents' personal resilience.

Strategies and Practices to Build Personal Resilience

From this study, organizations can use the following strategies to help strengthen the personal resilience of their employees engaged in disaster response.

- Ensure essential employees are aware of their disaster responsibilities. Providing clear disaster roles in job descriptions or onboarding events informs individuals of their responsibilities and provides new hires an opportunity to clarify tasks and required protocols. This serves as documentation outlining expected actions in disaster response situations. This can help new employees cope better with the impacts of disasters. For onboarding purposes, leveraging GenAI can support new and existing employees. With an internal AI assistant, employees can quickly reference disaster roles and responsibilities at any time, tied to their job descriptions or those highlighted in UF/IFAS or the county's emergency disaster plan.
- Consider disaster training for disaster response professionals. Knowing how to respond in highly stressful situations can help strengthen overall personal resilience. GenAI can also help design real-world scenarios and training exercises that allow employees to practice their designated disaster response roles, which

can help them feel more prepared, especially for new employees or those experiencing a disaster for the first time in this role.

- Encourage the use of existing services and resources for professionals who need help coping with natural disasters. In some cases, individuals might be unaware of the resources available to them. Having a list of these resources readily available can help disaster response professionals get the support they need. This can help reduce feelings of alienation, stress, and powerlessness, and strengthen personal resilience. In addition to a quick-reference guide to communicating disaster roles and responsibilities, an internal AI assistant can provide a real-time repository of resources for employees coping with disaster impacts.

To strengthen the hardy attitudes that influence personal resilience, persons involved in disaster response can follow the steps below.

- **Challenge:** *Reflect* on their hurricane experiences. This could help disaster response professionals identify past instances where things could have been done differently. As such, they gain insights that aid in continuous learning.
- **Commitment:** *Connect* with others. Those engaged in disaster response should actively seek to stay connected with friends, family, and co-workers while engaged in hurricane response efforts. This can help prevent alienation and isolation and strengthen social support networks.
- **Control:** *Seek* advice. Especially for first-time disaster response professionals, engaging in hurricane response efforts can be overwhelming. Seeking advice from experienced colleagues may be helpful in clarifying roles and expectations. If disaster response professionals have some idea of what to expect and how to cope, they may feel more in control of the situation.

Conclusion

Personal resilience is an important consideration for Extension and disaster response professionals. It focuses on reducing stress and increasing coping abilities in difficult situations such as natural disasters. Strategies to improve personal resilience can help individuals involved in response efforts to cope better in disaster situations (e.g., fires, floods, hurricanes, etc.), meet clients' needs, balance personal and professional demands, and reduce mental and physical stress.

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