

RICHIE HARKHAM

RETURN ON RESILIENCE WHITE PAPER SUMMARY

RETURN ON RESILIENCE: TURNING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES INTO GROWTH

Preface

This gives a brief overview of Richie's story and how it changed his life and led to the inception of Return on Resilience.

Richie Harkham is a motivational speaker and entrepreneur who has co-founded several successful businesses such as Energy Alliance, the Australian College of Physical Education and Harkham Wines. A defining moment in Richie's life came with a near-death motorcycle accident in 2014. Over the course of 4 years he faced eight operations, a golden staph infection and years of chronic pain. Being stuck in hospital beds often months at a time, Richie started to lose hope and his sense of identity. Seven operations had failed, and doctors were suggesting a leg amputation. More than two years into his journey, Richie was fortunate enough to receive a knee transplant from a young boy. Feeling inspired and touched by the donation and meeting seven other people whose lives were also helped by this boy's donations, Richie decided to write a letter in gratitude to the boy's father. Informing him that his desire to honour the memory of the young boy, Richie had founded a charity, Hark Angels. The aim of Hark Angels is to build schools in impoverished communities in third world countries taking inspiration from an experience Richie had before his accident, where he helped build a school in Kenya and his father who was very charitable.

In the years following the accident, Richie was often approached by others going through similar physical and mental trauma and in an effort to help people move through their struggles he distilled his experiences into a framework called 'Return on Resilience'. Although, this concept originated in Richie's traumatic experience, there are commonalities in psychological processes related to suffering that make it applicable for individuals experiencing different types of trauma. May it be suffering an illness, losing a loved one, bullying or failing exams, sudden loss of wealth, surviving natural disasters like bushfires or any other type of hardship. Return on resilience isn't just about bouncing back from adversity but just as much about finding the opportunity in the bad things that happen to us.

When considering a business deal, we look the Return on Investment (ROI), at how much money can we gain from an investment. Similarly, Return on Resilience (ROR) aims to maximise a person's 'profit' from the hard work someone goes through who is suffering adversity.

Who will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) versus post traumatic growth (PTG)?

Clinical psychology researchers have investigated what factors determine whether a person develops symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or post traumatic growth (PTG) following a traumatic event. Researchers argue that the experience of a psychological crisis is necessary for growth following trauma. Therefore, it's not the case that people who grow from hardship experienced any less suffering or emotional defeat than those who develop PTSD. Instead, post traumatic growth (PTG) is the outcome of managing stress and restoring the assumptions about a just world.

Recovery from stress and the development of resilience is a process of selective adaptation, where conflicting cognitions and emotions are reconciled into a mosaic of our past and future selves.



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Jared Diamond's (2019) poses that how individuals consider 12 factors that will influence how and what changes need to be made in response to a potentially traumatic event.

These are:

1. Acknowledgment that one is in crisis.
2. Acceptance of one's personal responsibility to do something.
3. Building a fence, to delineate one's individual problems needing to be solved.
4. Getting material and emotional help from other individuals and groups.
5. Using other individuals as models of how to solve problems.
6. Ego strength.
7. Honest self-appraisal.
8. Experience of previous personal crises.
9. Patience.
10. Flexible personality.
11. Individual core values.
12. Freedom from personal constraints.

The core idea of HOPE

Being the first person in the world to receive a knee transplant meant there were no prior individuals that had been in his exact situation for Richie to learn from and use as a model of how best to respond. Instead, Richie relied on somewhat similar situations, where individuals had recovered from traumatic motorcycle accidents. One prominent model for Richie was provided from a Ted Talk by Hugh Herr, the co-director for the centre for extreme Bionics at the MIT media lab, where he pioneers biohybrid smart prostheses that enable amputees to run climb and dance again (Herr, 2014; 2018). Faced with the possibility on numerous occasions that he may lose his legs, Herr provided a model of another potential future for Richie, which provided him with hope. The finding of hope is a core idea in the Return on Resilience framework. Hope is universal as it plays an essential role for all of us to experience a sense of well-being. However, it's particularly important during hardship.

The Core idea of OPTIMISM and Others with Similar Experiences.

Individuals with well-developed ego-strength are optimistic, resilient, resourceful and able to adapt in the face of challenges. The experience of positive emotions is essential to build personal capacities. Thus, it is necessary for an individual to experience positive emotion to grow psychologically. For Richie, the volunteer experience in Kenya and the gratitude he felt towards the child donor of his knee provided the positive impetus for psychological growth triggered by his traumatic experience.

The feeling of relatedness to others changed a lot following the accident. Richie describes the chronic pain made it hard for him to relate to other people and that he deliberately sought out other people who went through similar experiences and losses.

Being able to share the experience with people made him feel understood and like he was going through the trauma with someone else. The lack of autonomy was another challenging aspect of the recovery for Richie. Being in the hospital often weeks at a time, having to rely on other people for help and the feeling of having lost control felt very foreign to him. The realisation came that although he can't control the outcome of every operation or whether he will get to keep his leg or not, what he can control is seeking the right medical care, weaning himself off pain medication and doing his physiology exercises. This distinction of what he can and can't control changed his mindset around his lack of autonomy.

Regaining a sense of competence was another important step in Richie's recovery. During the months he spent in a wheelchair or on a crutch he felt less competent and less like a person. Going back to the winery after the accident and realising how little he would be able to do of what he used to, was a frustrating experience. However, his determination and the rapid steps he took early in his recovery made him feel competent and capable. By building on these positive steps and further fostering thoughts of being competent and capable, eventually he was able to regain a sense of self-determination, which bolstered his ego-strength and helped him grow, which was a resilience factor against being traumatised by his accident.

The Core idea of GRATITUDE

For Richie, the gratitude he felt towards the child donor for his knee transplant interpreted through his experience in Kenya and his father's charity provided potentially traumatic experiences meaning. Through honest self-appraisal, self-compassion, positive reframing of events, and the presence of meaning and search for purpose. Richie was able to call upon his core values and engage in selective changes to develop his ego-strength to avoid the development of PTSD.

The Core idea of RESILIENCE

Resilience is often described as an ability to 'bounce back' from difficult times. Individuals who experience early life trauma were more likely to exhibit resilience and PTG, when they also showed higher levels of optimism, gratitude and positive reframing (Schaefer et al., 2018). Following his motorcycle accident, Richie developed optimism by finding accounts of people with similar traumatic experiences as him. He experienced gratitude for the donation of the knee transplant and practised reframing by seeing the challenging times as an opportunity for growth. Return on Resilience may be to utilise these factors more effectively. In short, post-traumatic growth and resilience are both defined by finding the positive within adversity. Personal attributes and psychological techniques such as reframing negative life events in a way that gives them meaning and utilising the skills and resources necessary to make positive changes are important factors contributing to a Return on Resilience.

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The Core Idea of Return on Resilience

Return on Resilience consist of four main components:

1. Identity

'Identity' explores how trauma alters our identity and how the choices we make to find hope define our post-trauma identity.

'It's only when we are faced with the toughest of times, we truly get to know who we really are' Richie Harkham says. For Richie, his identity shifted significantly following his motorcycle accident. Prior to that, he identified himself as a healthy, young and successful entrepreneur. Being able to travel the world and turn small ventures into successful businesses. His work on the winery was often physically demanding between picking grapes, punching the must, climbing up barrels and dragging wine hoses. Of course, none of this was possible in the years following the accident during which he often found himself bound to the hospital bed. Richie felt as though his pre-accident identity and no place in the post-accident reality. The first step in the framework of Return on Resilience is about finding hope again after one's identity has been crushed through a traumatic experience. Having hope is the foundation to all other steps and is crucial for posttraumatic growth. The phenomenon of hope is universal, multidimensional and complex. In Richie's case this was researching different charities, watching Ted talks of motivational speakers who had gone through similar hardship and finding documentaries that inspired him. Richie also practiced visualising. Visualising what he can do in the future, visualising being back travelling to help children in third world countries and visualising speaking on stage and inspiring others. Visualising is a technique whereby a person mentally rehearses future activities and has been shown to increase motivation as well as capability for the task (Rennie, Harris & Webb, 2014).

2. Integration

'Integration' demonstrates how a person's post-trauma identity is integrated into the new reality through adaptive event processing. Positive event reframing as well as reappraisal of emotional and physical event responses are in focus. The second part of Return on Resilience is about integrating this newfound hope and changed identity into the post-event reality. Integrating the experience, the shock and emotions to make a successful transition.

Processing the trauma can be differently challenging for people. This cognitive reappraisal is what Richie would describe as finding the opportunity in bad things. To find new meaning and a new identity when it feels like it's been crushed and to see the trauma as a chance for growth. Richie employed different methods in order to re-frame the traumatic experience of the motorcycle accident. He diarised, used perspective taking and positive self-talk such as: "Don't be defined by injury and suffering." While avoiding unhelpful habits of mind such as black and white/all or nothing thinking like: "If I can't walk, I will never be happy again".

Following the identification of an unhelpful emotional state the use of a mantra can help interrupt any rumination. These practices help restore appropriate brain network dynamics. Richie's mantra was unorthodox, but effective, he asked himself repeatedly "where is my strength?" With this question, he interrupted unhelpful ruminations and objectively oriented himself towards hope and positive emotional states. More conventionally, Richie asked himself "how can I be kind to myself" acknowledging the distress he was experiencing and acting to himself like a friend would, in essence being self-compassionate. These questions were mantras that helped Richie regulate arousal and integrate his experiences.

3. Inner Influence

'Inner Influence' describes finding the ability and strength within yourself to uncover opportunities in hardship and collect a 'Return on Resilience' Mindfulness, self-compassion and self-inquiry are key concepts in Inner Influence. This stage is about influencing yourself to cope with the hardship you are facing. To find the ability and strength within yourself to uncover the opportunity of this challenging time and to find your Return on your Resilience. A stressor portrays an opportunity not only for resilience and future buffer against hardship but also a platform to reach a higher status of functioning than before, to collect a return on resilience.

Mindfulness, self-compassion and self-inquiry are key concepts in Inner Influence to move past the pain and find a deeper meaning in life. Mindfulness can help approach painful memories, helping challenging emotions and thoughts to subside and therefore building distress tolerance ('banking resilience'). Being compassionate with oneself and accepting the imperfections all humans share reduces isolation and builds a feeling of connectedness. Lastly, developing self-knowledge through techniques such as Socratic questioning, ie: What am I thinking (psychological inquiry), what do I believe in (spiritual inquiry), what am I doing (behavioural inquiry) and what am I feeling (emotional inquiry)? is associated with greater resilience and self-affect. This may assist in uncovering a broader personal purpose in life which in turn aids to recover from negative experiences.

4. Inspire

'Inspire' goes beyond overcoming hardship by finding inspiration as well as being an inspiration to others. The fourth and last concept of Return on Resilience 'Inspire' is about going beyond overcoming the adversity and finding the broader meaning and purpose that derives from the crisis. Richie found his Return on Resilience when he received the knee transplant from the young boy and was inspired to create the Hark Angel Foundation which's aim it is to build schools in underprivileged countries. Richie was also able to inspire others going through challenges by talking about his journey of recovery following the accident and helping people find their Return on Resilience.

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Empathy and altruism are often outcomes of having grown from trauma and engaging in pro-social behaviour which promotes well-being. In fact, there is a strong association between people who have suffered trauma and who engage in pro-social behaviours (Frazier et al., 2013). People who do engage in pro-social actions experience greater well-being, positive affect and sense of meaning in life as prosocial behaviours are shown to give a sense of control and optimism about future. The purpose that people derive from hardship vary individually depending on a person's context and so does the extent to which an individual can make a positive impact in someone else's life. Ultimately, having the capacity to help others lead to stronger self-identity and activate social resources which in turn equip us to cope with future hardship.

For more information or to access the full white paper, please email richie@richieharkham.com