

Learning super-resilience from Nature:

Systemic responses to systemic overload

Picture this scene: deep in a Wiltshire wood, a group of hospital doctors are sitting around a campfire. It's dark, and there's profound silence in the forest around them, broken by owls calling nearby. Slowly, the doctors take the risky step of opening up in front of colleagues: talking about feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, the pressure to be superhuman that they put on themselves, and sense from patients. It's tempting to be heroic, but where is the place for emotions and uncertainty?

The seeds of creativity often grow from adversity: there's some hope in the way that overstress and burnout are now so severe in many parts of our health service that they can be talked about, and there's an openness to new ways to address them.

The scale of the problems is huge, and the resources to address them may seem slim: this makes it hard to focus on systemic solutions rather than mitigation. My definition of resilience is the capacity to thrive and grow through challenges, rather than coping or surviving.

It may be helpful to see the resilience issues of the health sector as a lead indicator for society at large. It's clear that systemic responses are urgently needed for health professionals now, and I believe this will be apparent for the whole population within the next 5-10 years.

Super-resilience: what and how

I've coined the term super-resilience to highlight the radical step-up in resilience skills that is needed to grow through the overwhelming pressures we already face, and the way these will grow further in the years ahead.

So what would a systemic form of super-resilience look like? It would need to be easy to understand and apply in everyday life and work; readily accessible; without dependence on megabuck funding from Government or other magical sources.

Although it is early days, the Woodland Resilience Immersions for health professionals being piloted at Hazel Hill Wood may offer a catalyst to growing super-resilience. These programmes have been jointly created by David Peters of Westminster Centre for Resilience, Daghni Rajasingam of Guys and St Thomas', with myself and the team at Hazel Hill Trust - the charity which owns and runs Hazel Hill Wood.

David and Daghni have been leading resilience programmes in the health sector for many years. They had realised the need for more powerful, catalytic interventions than one can hope for in a few hours in a training room at a London hospital. Their guess was that some kind of residential nature immersion was the best option: and I was able to offer both knowhow and a venue to explore this.

Hazel Hill Wood: the back story

In my twenties and thirties, I had a successful business management career in the building materials sector, which gave me the capital to set up two educational charities which laid the foundations for this recent work in the health sector.

Through the 1990's, I led the creation of a 130-acre organic farm and education centre in Dorset see www.magdalenfarm.org.uk. I slowly realised the power of analogies between organic cultivation and human sustainability and applied these for work organisations and elsewhere. You can learn more in my first book, *The Natural Advantage: Renewing yourself*.

More recently, I have used these analogies in resilience programmes at Hazel Hill Wood: this is a 70-acre conservation woodland and residential centre near Salisbury. One major focus has been Nourishing the Front Line: participants have included GP's, hospice and private care staff, local authority and charity managers, plus counsellors and trainers.

Does Nature immersion have credentials?

However inspired you may be about a Woodland Immersion, there's probably a counterweight somewhere in your organisation, who asks sceptically, "So you seriously want to spend two days and £x of my budget to sit in a wood, round a campfire?"

I can offer two good responses to the sceptics. The first is the substantial body of mainstream medical research on the benefits of Nature contact: a good overview is the book *Your Brain on Nature*, by two doctors who teach at Harvard Medical School.

Whilst much of this research covers benefits to the population in general, it highlights some issues especially relevant for medics. For example, Directed Attention Fatigue. One of the biggest changes many medics have described to me is the unremitting quality of their work: there is virtually no recovery time.

The best antidote to DAF and long hours on screens is more experiences of *involuntary* attention. Researchers describe a key benefit of exposure to Nature as its 'intrinsic fascination', the way it relaxes our intense directed focus. Time in Nature is proven to induce positive feelings which can outweigh stress and anxiety.

The second response to sceptics is more about cogent logic. Even they should accept that the issues of over-stress and burnout are serious and systemic, and won't be resolved without different kinds of intervention. And surely there's good logic in learning from resilient ecosystems to find analogies for human wellbeing?

In trying to understand how people tick, we often turn to parallels with man-made systems, such as computers and cars. But medics will easily realise that people are far more subtle and complex.

The value of analogies with Nature is that they are tangible, we all have some personal experience of them, and it helps us to explore an organism that needs to be cultivated and steered, not driven or programmed.

Another element of cogent logic is the evidence from the pilot groups with doctors. The professional evaluation by Westminster Centre for Resilience showed statistically significant improvements in mood, overall and for a range of specific feelings including fatigue and confusion, and a rise in esteem related effect.

Here are three quotes from the qualitative part of this evaluation:

- *Most doctors went into the experience with their eyes fairly closed to the benefits of nature, which contrasted dramatically to the final evaluation where accessing nature was seen as 'an absolute essential.'*
- *There was a real sense of collaborative action, with doctors all wanting to create systems at work which would reinforce their experiences at Hazel Hill Wood.*
- *In conclusion, this report has found the intervention to be effective, feasible, appropriate, and accepted by the doctors.*

And here are some quotes from the doctors:

- *I'm taking away recharge, vulnerability, warmth and connection and sharing. I've found my inspiration again, I hope to come back again.*
- *This was the best mental spa I've ever been to.*
- *What was good was that you didn't tell us what to do, you gave us multiple ways to choose our own, we are not used to training like that.*

So what happens in a Woodland Resilience Immersion?

These programmes can be tailored to the needs of participants. For the pilots to date, the structures we pre-planned worked well, and can be treated as indicative of the content.

1. **Arrival and orientation:**

Some participants may be uneasy coming to a residential in a wood. We help them to settle by showing them their room, giving them a tasty lunch, and briefing them on practicalities.

2. **Introductory session:**

This includes aims of the whole workshop, agreeing groundrules like confidentiality, and short personal introductions. The key part of this session is a consultation on the proposed elements of the programme, with scope for participants to set priorities.

3. **Conservation session:**

By three o'clock we aim to get everyone outside, doing simple physical tasks which sustain the ecosystem at the wood. This has proved a highly valuable element in the whole process. It creates a deep re-orientation, from ailing humans to a resilient, healthy natural system. Doing a physical task with low mental demands and a clear, immediate outcome helped doctors drop many layers of stress. And the scope for informal conversation during the tasks started the process of reflection.

4. Free time/play time:

The basic aim of this late afternoon slot was further decompression. We gave participants an hour of free time to use as they wished. Some wanted to sit quietly among the trees, or have walk and chat with a colleague. Some chose to play vigorous games like hide and seek, or the Evolution Game. I realised that games can be a very time-efficient way to de-stress, and a great way to burn off adrenaline overload.

5. Evening campfire:

After time for showers and supper, the group gathers around a fire in the heart of the wood. The combination of the natural setting, the time of day, and the previous processes, enables some deep personal sharing and reflection.

It was striking how many doctors at this point said they had nowhere to go with difficult feelings, such as stress, doubts over a patient decision, or a conflict with a colleague or boss. To show such feelings to other medics could lead to a loss of their confidence in you. And mostly, family and friends were dismissed as confidants because “non-medics wouldn’t understand.”

As our evening around the fire unfolded, the sense of mutual understanding and support was palpable. Having the senior medics in the group model vulnerability, and give perspective from their experience, helped hugely. There was great relief in having difficult feelings witnessed, and realising they were shared by others, in a group of professional peers.

6. Morning session one:

It’s worth mentioning that sitting down to eat proper meals while conversing with colleagues was greatly valued. After breakfast, we began with a checkin, which showed that the catalytic effect we aimed for with day one had happened. The prevailing mood when the doctors arrived at the wood was tensing up and getting by. Now, there was a shared sense that positive change was possible, and a thirst for fresh approaches. This teed up the main part of this session: a guided walk round the wood, to experience how analogies with this resilient ecosystem could help in daily work: see more below.

7. Morning session two:

The aim here was to learn more simple resilience tools, and to practice applying them to typical stresses at work. These tools were drawn from mindfulness, and from our front-line programmes at Hazel Hill. We ended the morning with some free time for reflection, solo or with others.

8. Concluding session:

After lunch, and formal evaluation questionnaires, we gathered round a campfire for a debrief and discussion on how to take this forward. Participants were enthusiastic and creative about ways to root nature-based, resilience in their own work and their team’s, and these topics are covered further below.

The Seven Seeds of Natural Happiness

In the guided walk around the wood, we usually explore three of the seven principles in this model which I have evolved from twenty years of nature-based wellbeing and resilience programmes.

You can find a summary of the whole model on my website, and it is the basis for my first book: *The Natural Advantage: Renewing Yourself*.

In the limited space available here, I will describe one of the seven principles: *composting*. In a cultivated organic ecosystem (such as a farm or market garden), waste is recycled to provide the main source of future growth. By contrast, on mainstream farms, growth is driven by artificial fertilisers which deplete the soil's vitality and resilience, and build up polluting residues. All this has parallels for human ways of working.

To demonstrate this principle, I take people to an area of conifers. As we stand on a bed of rotting pine needles, I explain how composting transforms plant and animal waste into the fuel for future growth. I ask "what could you do with the waste matter of negative feelings, anxious thoughts, unresolved conflicts?" And I demonstrate a couple of five-minute ways to start this composting process, such as deep continuous breathing, or "angry walking." Bigger issues need more time, and maybe professional help, but the principle of 'compost the crap' still applies.

Both participants and organisers of these Immersions know there's a large gap between a good workshop, and sustained change: this gap prompted lively conversations as the time at the wood neared its close. This is still work in progress, but here are 'some of the promising threads:

Nature contact: Readers may know of various studies showing that some form of Nature contact helps patient recovery rates. A view of outdoor greenery has benefits, or a pot plant or even a picture. It's surely logical that medical staff will also benefit, and this is a pretty easy step to take.

Green moments: The lack of time for any kind of self-care is a major challenge, but neurobiology supports the view that even brief interventions help. A few deep breaths can reduce stress, and a few moments of mindful centring can mitigate an upsetting episode. But when? Walking along corridors, scrubbing up, using the loo, were three suggestions.

Quality interactions: A recurring theme was the erosion of settled work teams, and a loss of rapport and support. One benefit of the Woodland Immersions was to spark proactive responses in place of coping. If one individual, even a junior in the team, starts a habit of positive appreciation for colleagues, it creates an upward spiral. Analogies between ecosystems and work teams can help: for example, valuing symbiosis, diversity, and wild margins.

Systemic view: It's clearly easy for medics to be overloaded by responding to immediate demands. To switch into a mindset of systemic initiatives, cultivating improvement, needs time, a change of venue, and fresh stimuli. The Immersions generated motivation and a range of practical ideas which will hopefully take root.

Whatever Next?

The early signs are encouraging: our overall aim in 2019 is to explore ways to build on this start and to propagate it. The main elements envisaged for this year are:

- **Further pilot programmes:** we aim to run several Immersions this year, including one for GP's in June, and hopefully one or two for the mental health sector.
- **Link to ongoing processes:** ideally there would be some regular follow-up and support process in the workplace, for example a monthly two-hour session. So far, this has proved hard to organise.
- **Longitudinal evaluation:** Westminster Centre for Resilience aim to assess benefits of these programmes after three and six months.
- **Funding:** So far, funding has come from an improvised range of sources. During 2019, we hope to find more stable funding which could help expand the programme in 2020.
- **Propagation partners:** Hazel Hill Trust is a small charity which so far has only run programmes at its own venue. However, one aim of the Trust is to share its expertise and encourage other venues to develop nature-based programmes. During 2019, we hope to find partners who can roll out Immersions in 2020.

Innovations often look bizarre until the needs they meet become overwhelming. We may be close to that tipping point. Woodland Resilience Immersions have grown from long years of development by two sound organisations, and like a tree, the roots have to establish before the outward growth.

For info on Woodland Resilience Immersions, including the June 10-11 programme for GP's, see www.hazelhill.org

To receive occasional email updates on this work, or to contact Alan, use data@workingvision.com

For more on Alan's Seven Seeds model, see www.naturalhappiness.net