

Change Resilience: Learning from Our Patients

Anna E. Daytz, BS¹

Julia B. Silverman, BS¹

Neil Tanna, MD, MBA^{1,2}

Hempstead and Great Neck, NY

One of the few certainties in life is that at one point or another, each one of us will face adversity. Although adversity is often looked at in a negative light, it can be quite important. Adversity can help us to form new perspectives, build connections with others, learn to ask for help and, perhaps most importantly, find resilience within ourselves.

Resilience is a phenomenon that can be defined as the ability to adapt to and overcome adversity. There is a field of science, known as resilience science, dedicated to understanding why some individuals are better at overcoming adversity—sometimes significantly more than others.¹ Children who experienced high-risk circumstances such as poverty, disaster, and trauma, have inspired scientists by their ability to adapt to their environment and develop into well-adjusted individuals.¹ Researchers have examined genetics, neuroplasticity, and stress response systems as biological explanations for the incredible resilience of some.¹ It has even been discovered that adults who faced adversity during childhood were more likely to exhibit more prosocial behavior as adults, displaying higher rates of empathy, self-identity formation, and amelioration than those without having experienced trauma.²

Discovering how to build resilience in response to changes in our personal lives is not easy. This specific type of resilience, known as change resilience, is one that our patients in plastic and reconstructive surgery can uniquely demonstrate. For that reason, we have decided to look at examples in the field of plastic surgery, where patients undergo significant changes to their physical and mental state, to better

understand how we as doctors and humans can demonstrate resilience.

When a patient is diagnosed with breast cancer, their life changes in an instant. One of the initial decisions that patients often have is whether to undergo mastectomies and lose a part of themselves that they have had most of their lives. For many women, breasts are tied to their gender identity, sexuality, and motherhood, so the decision to remove them is extremely difficult. Despite these challenges, our patients exemplify resilience by making this difficult decision quickly and beginning the long road of recovery ahead of them.

Certain psychosocial factors are associated with better breast cancer prognosis; these include marriage, social support, and minimizing denial and depression.³ Although some factors are beyond a patient's control, studies suggest that implementing wellness into a patient's treatment plan, through cognitive intervention, meditation, and psychosocial education programs can enable them to develop resilience and have positive impacts on patient outcomes.⁴

Another area in plastic surgery where we see the exemplification of resilience is in our transgender patients. These patients often face adversity from a very young age—whether it be the internal struggle of gender dysphoria, bullying and discrimination from others, or even fear of violence against their community—and many transgender folks are forced to find resilience within themselves early on. Although for many people, the decision to undergo lengthy operations with significant recoveries would be daunting, our transgender patients often make this decision rather easily. They know this is just the next step in their journey, and because they

From the ¹Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell; and ²Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Northwell Health.

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have been practicing resilience their entire lives, they can cope with the challenges that come with transgender surgery.

In the field of plastic and reconstructive surgery, resilience is everywhere. Arguably, the unique aspect of plastic surgery is the profound psychological impact of our work. We work to restore the form and function of some of the most sensitive parts of the human body; those parts are what we use to display emotion, express ourselves, and are what society accepts as the definition of gender. Our role as physicians is not only to achieve this restoration but to serve as a support system to empower our patients during some of the most difficult experiences of their lives.

As plastic surgeons, we learn from our patients every day. We learn how to create innovative solutions to surgical problems. We learn how to adapt to challenges and overcome difficulties to achieve the goal of complete and total form and function. The pathway to resilience is not linear; there are multiple routes that can be taken to achieve emotional equilibrium that results from trauma or adversity.⁵ Our work as plastic surgeons can benefit by following the suit of those whom we serve; the bravery, strength, and resilience that our patients embody.

Neil Tanna, MD

Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
Northwell Health
600 Northern Boulevard, Suite 310
Great Neck, NY 11021
ntanna@northwell.edu
Instagram: @drneiltanna
Facebook: @drneiltanna
Twitter: @drneiltanna

DISCLOSURE

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