

# "Ordinary Magic" Among College Students: Resilience to Everyday Stressors



Naya Liberty & Dr. April Masarik – Human Development and Ecology Lab

Department of Psychological Science,  
Boise State University

*"I relate my life to a forest fire; While everything may burn down, the bits and pieces left behind (such as nuts and cones) can regrow into something equally or more beautiful."*

## INTRODUCTION

- In this qualitative study, we aimed to understand how college students describe their stressors and sources of resilience in their personal narratives
- Stress and resilience are **human universals**, traits shared across all of humanity, regardless of race, religion, political affiliation, or geographical location (Brown, 1991)

## WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

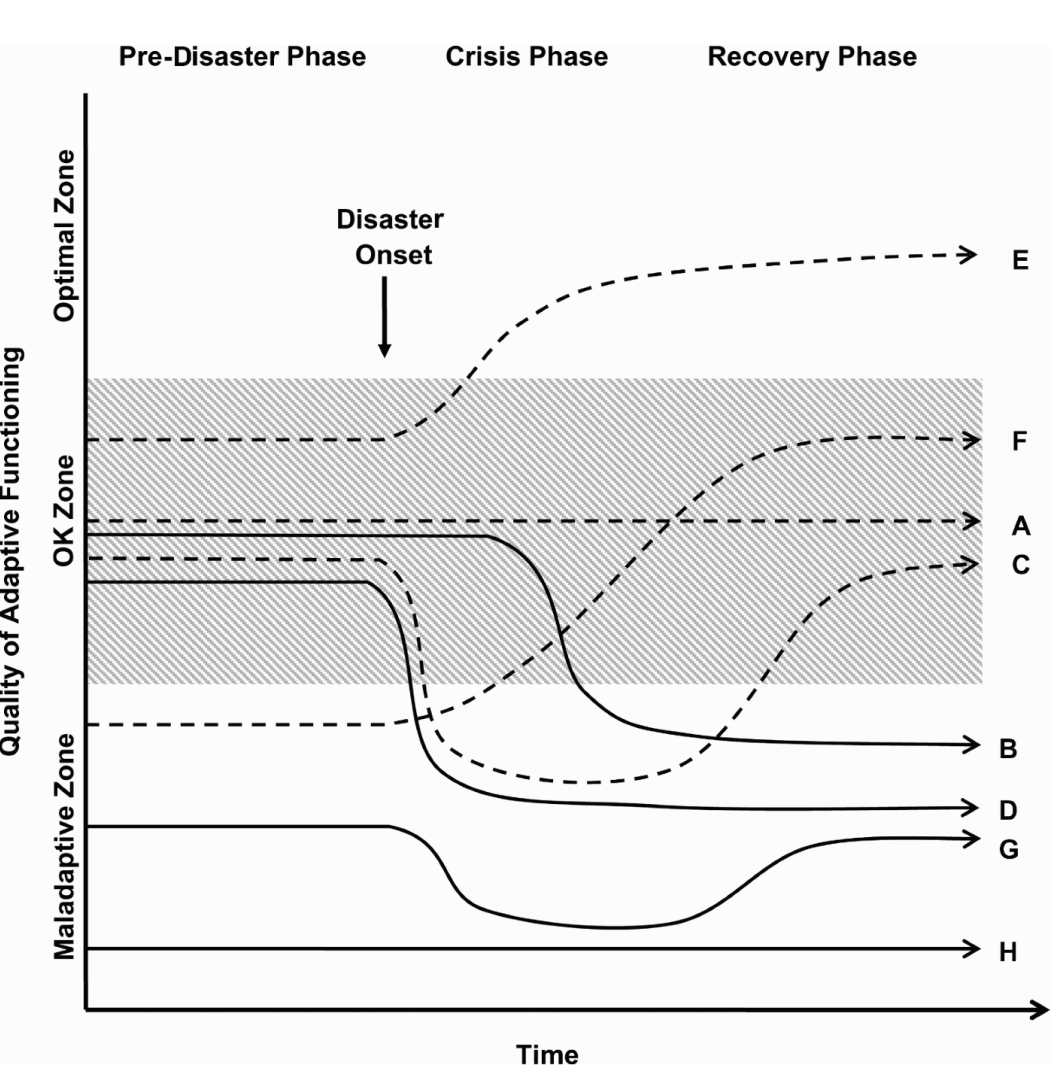
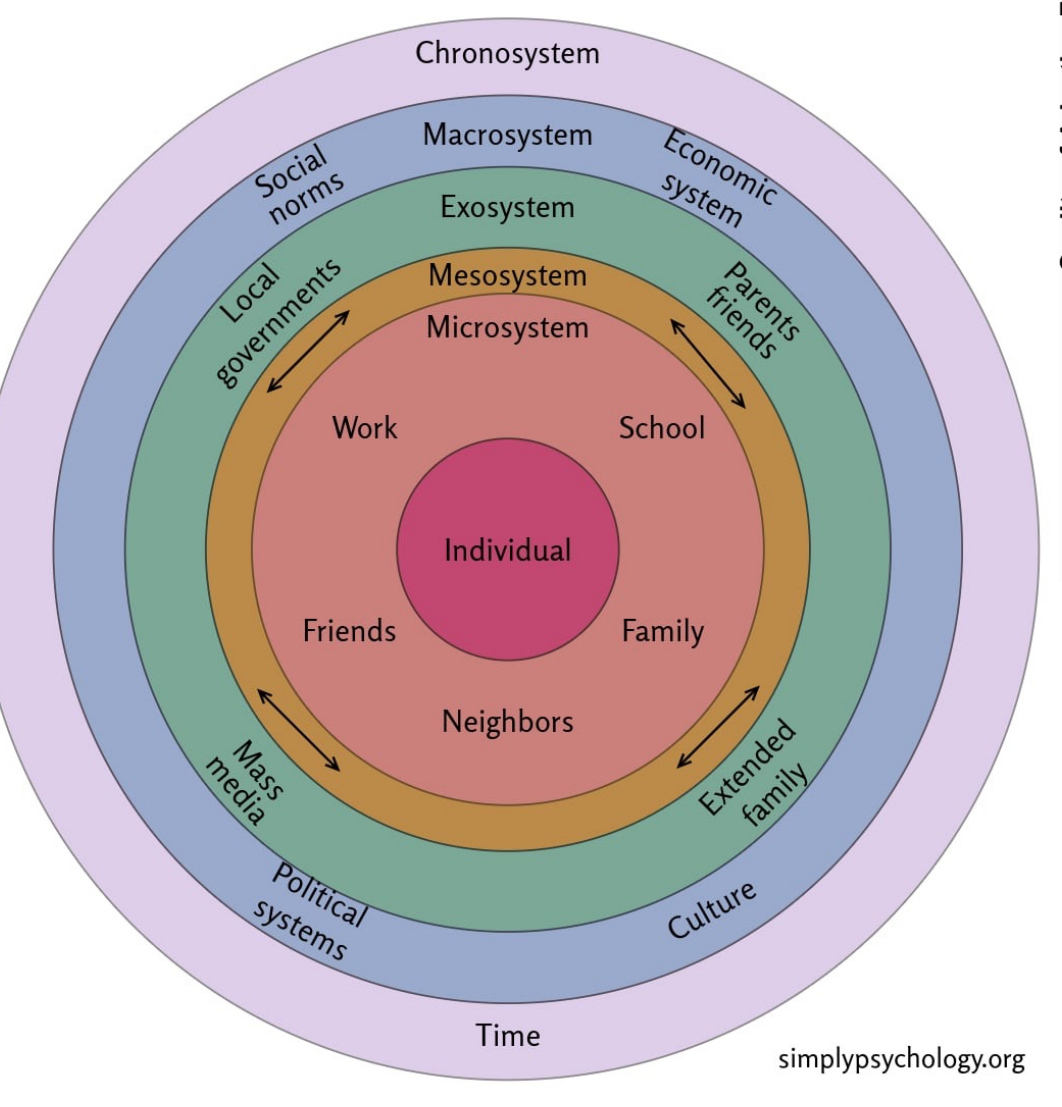
Resilience is:

- The ability to **adapt** to and **overcome** a stressor (Masten, 2021)
- Shaped by **protective** and **risk** factors that mitigate the effects of a stressor (Sameroff & Seifer, 1990)
- Resources at every level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which affect the quality and trajectory of adaptive functioning over time (Masten, 2012)

Resilience is NOT:

- The **absence** of trauma **symptoms**; people can return to their baseline functioning while demonstrating trauma symptoms in something called **post-traumatic growth** (PTG) (Yehuda & Flory, 2007)

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Masten's Examples of Adaptive and Maladaptive Pathways

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

- N = 189** undergraduate students enrolled in upper-division psychology courses at a university in the Great Intermountain West region
- Primarily **emerging adults**, ages 18- to 25-years-old
- Students were instructed to write their **autobiography**, discussing their most significant life events, close relationships, and experiences to date

### Method

- Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2005)

## FINDINGS

Findings are consistent with resilience theory, revealing **10 universal similarities in resilience** across the autobiographies of **emerging adults**

| 10 Themes of Stress and Resilience  |  |
|---|--|
| 1) Individuals have resources within themselves and their environment that affect the degree to which a stressor impacts them |  |
| 2) Stressors are common   |  |
| 3) Stressors cause distress and specific reactions  |  |
| 4) Individuals attempt to cope with stressors   |  |
| 5) There are often valuable lessons learned from experiencing a stressor  |  |
| 6) Many experience growth during and after a stressor   |  |
| 7) Stress and coping can reveal new curiosities, interests, and passions  |  |
| 8) Stressful experiences shape us as time goes by and we make sense of them   |  |
| 9) Many report a sense of honor, success, or pride in overcoming challenges when reflecting upon them                         |  |
| 10) Individuals possess and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity   |  |

## EXAMPLES: STUDENT QUOTES

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Resources</b>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Growing up, I have had to figure a lot of things out for myself, not always having my parents there to assist."</li> <li>"I could say I had a free childhood, free of worry, stress, and not really knowing how life could change in a blink of an eye."</li> <li>"Girl Scouts had allowed me to gain confidence in my ability to succeed."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Stressors</b>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"During my junior year of college, I had to medically withdraw to regain control over my life."</li> <li>"Two days later, I had a miscarriage, and it was terrifying."</li> <li>"In 2022, his suicide forced me to confront the fragility of life once again."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Distress and Reactions</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"This whole experience was very traumatizing and I felt like I had no future."</li> <li>"It's had a major effect on my views and beliefs—it motivates me to be so different from them."</li> <li>"I worked hard to create a stable environment for my son, even as I confronted the unresolved feelings toward my mother and my own upbringing."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Coping</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I mask all my struggles and differences to fit the role of what I assumed was the perfect child."</li> <li>"I began to self-harm and would isolate myself away from everybody."</li> <li>"I do like to believe that my loved ones are everywhere. They're in the sky, the trees, the ladybugs that show up randomly, and in every good thing that happens to me. They're everywhere and nowhere all at once, but I can always feel their presence."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Lessons Learned</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Death is something that you can never fully prepare for, but I have learned that it is important to showcase your love to those who mean the most to you."</li> <li>"I learned that I love the ocean as a hobby and a passion, not a career."</li> <li>"I now know that I do not want to ever let myself be stuck in a relationship that I am truly unhappy in."</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Growth</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I restarted therapy, learned how to communicate difficult subjects effectively, and began my journey of self-acceptance."</li> <li>"I decided to write the truth because I don't think it should be something I am ashamed of anymore."</li> <li>"I was able to find myself again and became the best version of me."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>New interests</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Because of my personal experiences with bullying, significant loss with no outlet, and a plethora of other trauma that's too much to get into, I made the decision to become a children's trauma therapist."</li> <li>"I also found purpose through these experiences. I decided that I wanted to be a psychologist and provide therapy for those struggling."</li> <li>"I have not forgotten all the struggles in life, and I use it to fuel my passion in school now."</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Shaping us and meaning making</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Each experience, each lesson, is woven into the fabric of who I am today shaping my beliefs, behaviors, and aspirations for the future."</li> <li>"All of these events have made me the person I am today. The rough patches in my life have made me stronger and brave."</li> <li>"Although obviously an unfortunate circumstance, my disability has become one of many parts of my own personal culture, and I wouldn't change it."</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Empowerment in reflection</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I can now say that I am so proud of myself for overcoming the losses in my life and even though it isn't always easy, I know that I am not alone."</li> <li>"That day we made up here was the catalyst for change that eventually got me where I am today. And while I paint this event tragic, I would do it all over again."</li> <li>"I know we all have lived our lives with these thoughts of wanting to do things over, but I own who I am today because of the struggles I had to go through growing up."</li> </ul> |
| <b>Resilience</b>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I relate my life to a forest fire; While everything may burn down, the bits and pieces left behind (such as nuts and cones) can regrow into something equally or more beautiful."</li> <li>"The abuse I survived taught me resilience like no one else I know."</li> <li>"Never before would I have thought that I would be doing what I loved once again. But this time, even stronger and better than before."</li> </ul>   |



## CONCLUSION

### Summary

- This work highlights a critical component of the human condition, a human universal, that connects individuals across time and humanity

### Implications

- This study can inform the community about the strength and resilience emerging adults possess when facing life stressors
- This research may also be used to create self-help tools that increase the accessibility of resources for individuals experiencing stress, helping them process their stress and recognize their own resilience

### Personal Growth Through Research

- Increased empathy toward peers
- Newfound confidence in the resilience and capability of emerging adults
- Appreciation for the beauty of human universals that connect us all

## REFERENCES

Bonanno, G. A. & Burton, C. L. (2013). Regulatory flexibility: An individual differences perspective on coping and emotion regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 591-612.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3(2), pp. 37-43.

Brown, D. E. (1991). In P. A. Butcher, L. Pearson, & S. Amernan (Eds.), *Human Universals* (1st Ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Masten, A. S., & Narayan, A. J. (2012). Child development in the context of disaster, war, and terrorism: Pathways of risk and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63, 227-257.

Mutuyimana, C., & Wen, J. (2025). Intergenerational associations of resilience and traumatic exposure with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. *International Journal of Mental Health*. Advance online publication. 1-13.

Sameroff, A. J. & Seifer, R. (1990). Early contributors to developmental risk. In J. Rolf, A. S. Masten, D. Cicchetti, K. H. Nuechterlein, & S. Weintraub (Eds.), *Risk and protective factors in the development of psychopathology* (1st ed., pp. 52-66). Cambridge University Press.

Shevell, M. C. & Devon, M. S. (2021). A multidimensional model of resilience: Family, community, national, global, and intergenerational resilience. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 119(2), 1-15.

Yehuda, R., Daskalakis, N. P., Desarnaud, F., Makotkine, I., Lehrner, A. L., Koch, E., Flory, J. D., Buxbaum, J. D., Meaney, M. J., & Bierer, L. M. (2013). Epigenetic biomarkers as predictors and correlates of symptom improvement following psychotherapy in combat veterans with PTSD. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 4(118), 1-14.

Yehuda, R. & Flory, J. D. (2007). Differentiating biological correlates of risk, PTSD, and resilience following trauma exposure. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 20(4), 435-447.

Scan QR code for Contact Information and PDF of poster

