

Interview - Reasons for Hope

by Atawhai Tibble, [Rachel Kenealy](#), and Richie Poulton on 8 May 2020 at 13:18

[1 Comments](#)

We're starting to emerge from a national lockdown, and many of us are beginning to understand that life is, and will be, very different from what we once knew. It is entirely natural that many of us are feeling anxious about what will happen tomorrow, next week or next month. The uncertainty can be overwhelming at times, especially if you are trying to build up your resilience.

We sat down with Richie Poulton, the Social Wellbeing Agency's Chief Science Advisor and Director of the Dunedin Study, and Atawhai Tibble, our Chief Māori Advisor. They offer reasons for hope at this time, drawing on personal experience, what Richie has discovered about resilience during his successful career heading the Dunedin Study, and what Atawhai has seen within Te Ao Māori over the past 4 weeks during his secondment to the Operational COVID Command centre.

Perhaps we could start with why we feel anxious in times of uncertainty?

Richie: The ability to feel anxious and fearful evolved to help us avoid danger, whether that's to our physical, emotional or mental wellbeing. Millenia later this adaptation still works that way, however, it becomes a problem when the feelings last too long or when they are out of proportion to the level of threat. Sometimes, these feelings can evolve into panic, which is when someone might start to seek treatment for a panic or anxiety disorder. It's important to remember that these feelings are common, and that everyone feels them from time to time.

Now, when we think about COVID-19, it's a very scary prospect because of its unpredictability. So many things about our everyday lives have been taken out of our control, like who we can see, where we can go and even what is safe to touch. It's very unsettling and taps directly into what drives those feelings of anxiety and fear.

Atawhai: Māori communities have had reason to be fearful of COVID-19. The Spanish Flu epidemic hit Māori hard in 1918-19. The toll was estimated to be seven times worse for Māori than Pākehā. To this day, the collective memory remains, through memorial stones and even names that descendants have like Mate Ohore which means 'sudden departure from this world'. This is what provides the context for groups like the Te Rōpū Whakakaupapa Urutā, who are Māori medical doctors, who have been strong advocates for more focused efforts on those at risk.

A lot of people have been saying they're overwhelmed with all manner of feelings like anxiety, fear, anger and apathy – why is this?

Richie: What we're going through right now, both as individuals and a collective, is a survival response. As I mentioned above, anxiety and fear evolved to tell us when there's danger, and we respond with 'fight or flight'. This response floods the body with cortisol, a stress hormone, and adrenaline, raising your heart rate, blood pressure and energy levels. This is why you might go through periods of feeling jittery, or feel a fluttering heart. Your body is also working to get you out of danger, and so has redirected resources away from things like complex problem solving and reflection. This is why some people experiencing this survival response can become irritable or forgetful.

For many of us, this survival response has been engaged since lockdown began, or even before as reports of the effects of COVID-19 came out of China, Iran and Italy. When this response continues for a long time, when the threat is perceived to still exist, we become fatigued. This is the feeling of being overwhelmed, when there doesn't seem to be a way to relieve or address the danger.

That sounds pretty grim, and it sounds like there's a lot of good reasons to feel that way at the moment. Can you offer us some hope?

Richie: Yes, of course! If anything, my time at the Dunedin Study has proven time and time again that people are very good at dealing with adversity. A lot of people underestimate how good they are at managing stress, anxiety and fear. This is what we call resilience, the ability to work with those feelings, or experiences really, and continue to be active in your community.

Many of the people in the Dunedin Study have faced the hardest of hardships – think of the five worst things that have happened in your life, how that made you feel, then double it and you are beginning to have an idea of the challenges these people are overcoming. They continue to donate their time and experiences to the Study, and together we've learned that not only are people very resilient, they also continue to be generous, kind and graceful. What continues to give them hope is that life carries on.

Atawhai: I'm with Richie. If you look at our history here in Aotearoa NZ, and you think about the things our communities have experienced and worked their way through, from wars, to natural disasters like the Christchurch earthquakes, to the Mosque attacks, to the White Island tragedy, there is plenty of evidence that we Kiwis are tougher and more resilient than we think.

Do you think there's anything in particular about Aotearoa that sets us up to recover well from this experience?

Atawhai: I think the ability to deal with tough situations and to make not only the best of things but survive and thrive is in our DNA. I'd say its in our whakapapa.

I think of my Koroua (Grandpa) Te Rauwhiro or Red, who went to war, and my Kuia (Grandma) Mihi, who was left at home with all their kids including my Dad. They didn't have much. War was not a nice thing. While Red won a military cross, he witnessed the ugliness of war and left a lot of young Ngati Porou cousins behind. I know it was hard for them adjusting when they came home. My Nanny Mihi and all my Nans worried constantly about their men, but they all had to get by, and do their bit for the war effort. Their toughness and resilience certainly humbles me. My kids are probably sick of me reminding them of all of this when they complain about the broadband signal being weak!

Richie: I'm reminded of the response I received from Kiwis after a documentary about the Dunedin Study, *Why Am I?*, aired a few years ago now. The public seemed to react strongly to the series, with many people reaching out to me to share deeply personal stories about their own experiences of resilience in the face of hurt, neglect, rejection, failure and extreme deprivation. A strong theme that came from those responses was that people were grateful for normalising the idea that we all struggle, some of us more than others, but usually at some point in time. The current COVID-19 crisis provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge that we're struggling and discuss these feelings honestly and openly.

My great-grandmother, who used to baby sit me as a child, took my mother into her care when my grandmother passed away. I found out during lockdown that my great-grandmother lost her own mother at the age of four and left home at twelve to train as a seamstress, all while earning her keep. I was humbled at this, completely in awe of her determination to carry on and look after her whānau.

What can we do now, while we are moving through the Alert Levels, to help with our resilience?

Atawhai: I want to acknowledge whānau who lost loved ones during Level 4 and were not able to mourn them

properly. I note that by and large the people of this land were very well behaved and played their part despite the challenges this raised in terms of our traditions and customs for things like tangihanga. But I also note the adaptability of our people. So rather than hongis, the Kahungunu and East Coast waves (raising the eyebrows) were developed. I saw drive through flu vaccinations at marae. I participated in various Zoom karakia or prayers which provided my whānau with real comfort. Then there was the emergence of the Zui (a Zoom hui) and the Wainanga (a wananga or meeting with waina or wine)! These are really great innovations that have enabled us to keep talking, chatting, messaging to those you love.

Let's keep this up! Keep saying Kia Ora to the person you pass on your bubble walk, keep thanking the person behind the counter at the supermarket or pharmacy. I've really noticed that people are making more of an effort to show gratitude, which I think is a great way to keep social.

Richie: We're lucky to live at a time in human history where technology is sufficiently developed and sophisticated to serve as an alternative for face-to-face, old-fashioned interactions. This gives us the chance to maintain social contact despite physical distance. One of the draw backs from needing to socially distance ourselves is that people can become isolated. This isn't just the physical situation of being isolated, it's also the feeling of being isolated, the feeling of being disconnected.

There's also some wonderful help only a few key-strokes a way if or when you need it. The best evidence-based therapies for extreme anxiety and sadness and other emotional and behavioural difficulties have been quietly migrating from the clinician's office to the internet for well over a decade. These E-Therapy approaches are supported by literally dozens and dozens of gold-standard controlled trials showing that such courses (accessible via a range of digital devices) are as effective as standard treatments delivered in the traditional face-to-face manner. These programmes work, and users like them. They are accessible to everyone who has access to the internet, and right now are offered free of charge, for example [Just A Thought](#) .

Ngā mihi nui Richie and Atawhai, it has been a pleasure to talk with you and hear your wisdom.

Atawhai: Mauri ora! COVID-19 has thrown everyone, into a new, unfamiliar and undiscovered land. But despite how strange this may seem, we've faced adversity and hardship many times before. We need to look to the past, and carry forward that which makes us stronger, better, and more connected than ever. *He waka eke noa.* We are in this together.

Comments (1)

Latest comment 15 months ago by Catherine Coates

1. Catherine Coates, 18 May 2020, 16:47 (15 months ago)

I'm the Group Welfare Manager for Marlborough CDEM Group - the things you said in this interview and in the paper, resonate completely! Thanks so much for these thoughts - practical, readable and relatable.

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