

**USING RATIONAL EMOTIVE AND BEHAVIORAL  
EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPING RESILIENCE AMONG  
YOUNG ADULTS**

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## **Introduction**

Health programs, especially those focused on mental health, target mostly the children and the adults over 50 years old and much less to adolescents or young adults (Williams et al., 2002). Fortunately, in the last decades, both in the literature and practice there has been an increase in interest for the latter. At the beginning of 2000, Williams and collaborators published a study in which they have given several arguments for the increased attention to adolescents and youth (14-25 years old). First, the authors argued that at this age stage the risk behaviors like consumption of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and sexual risk behaviors initiate. Second, Williams and collaborators draw attention over the failure of the campaigns and programs for adults or children when these are addressed to adolescents and youth. Third, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is a period with important repercussions in the individual's lifelong development (Williams, Holmbeck, & Greenley, 2002).

Positive psychology does not suggest an exclusive focus on individual's health status, instead, it refers to the features, the positive experiences that aim to improve the lifestyle and to prevent the pathologies (Seligman, 2000). This approach complements the cognitive behavioral perspective on mental health. In our research we do not intend to develop life quality in general, one that is valid for every person. Up to now, research results oppose explicitly such a perspective (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Now, researchers agree that the perception on quality of life is a subjective one. As a result, our main interest is to develop the resilience of young adults for they can experience wellbeing and develop themselves without being affected negatively by adversity.

## **Theoretical Background**

The term „resilience” come from Latin and derives from the word „resiliere” („re”= „re”, „salire”=”to jump”), and the first references dates back to 1630. As such, we can translate the term with „jump back in its place” which is synonymous with the terms „elastic”, „flexible”. In order to define „resilience” from a psychological perspective, we need to

understand the way in which the term evolved and was used in different domains, mainly, in science.

From an engineering perspective, a material has resilience if the following 3 assumptions are met: 1. There is a form of equilibrium and this form is the only status defined as normality; 2. The equilibrium is regained only by comparison with a force to which the material resists; 3. The kinds of forces that will act over the material are known right from the beginning (Holling, 2009). If we transfer the concept „resilience” from engineering to psychology, we need to take into account a more flexible definition of the term. This is achieved by reconsidering the terms „equilibrium” and „normality” and, also, the forces under which the system is capable of regaining its equilibrium. The most plausible reconsideration comes from economy domain where the equilibrium is constantly redefined in the face of changes which it goes under. This perspective about the level of equilibrium can be related to the development of a person. The changes under which the person goes during his/her existence imply essential modifications and, for each moment, the level of equilibrium is defined in a different way.

The eclectic approach by which „resilience” got into psychology led to multiple valances of the term. The first psychological studies defined resilience as a positive adaptation of a person to a traumatic context. Presently, it seems that the positive approach to psychology is gaining the struggle for „custody”. From the perspective of positive psychology, resilience is not a process which we carry out only when the system deals with strong trauma. Instead, resilience is used each time we intend to go from current status (whatever that is) to a better one (Scheffer et. al, 2001, Walker et. al, 2004). In this way, resilience becomes the system’s capacity to maintain itself and to improve itself in the course of external changes.

Theories about resilience adapted to the characteristics of adolescents and young adults, focus on resources and positive adaptations used for the healthy development of a person who deals with risky situations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Most of the definitions given to resilience of adolescents and young adults, mention the same two concepts: experience of adversity and use of protective factors when facing adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar et al., 2000). The protective factors are those which mediate and/or moderate the impact of risk factors over mental health.

Even though literature mentions several hostile (risk) factors, we still do not know about the perception of youth over the problematic situations with which they come across. Thus, the literature reports cases of excessive anger, of anxiety and depression both for the

persons who went through natural disasters and for those which face daily situations which they experience as catastrophic (ex. repeated arguments with family and friends). The qualification of a situation as averse and of a factor as a risky or neutral is up to the person.

The main interest of this research is the interpretation of risk factors. The phenomena that concern us to explain how resilience is used to regain the equilibrium are the mental scheme of a problematic situation, the way a person interprets a situation he/she deals with, the cognitions, the emotions, the expectancies. We need to know the individual's assumptions about the risk situation he/she perceives. We can not explain the choice of coping strategies and we can not evaluate the final status as optimal or not if we do not know the expectancies of the young about the results.

The absence of a paradigm to trace the limits of resilience definition brings ambiguities about the differences between resilience and adaptability, positive deviance, emotional intelligence and coping strategies. For a better understanding of the concept „resilience” we compare it with the above related concepts focusing on the specific differences between the terms.

*Adaptability.* No matter what type of adaptation we talk about, a person needs to develop the capacities to positively adapt to changes he/she goes through during his/her life. The lifelong development of positive adaptive abilities (ex. cognitive processes of anticipating risk) implies developing resilience (Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011).

*Positive deviance.* The specific difference between resilience and positive deviance is the fact that positive deviance builds its conclusions on comparing a person with others, which is a normative approach (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). On the other hand, the theories about resilience compare the person with himself/herself.

*Emotional intelligence.* In order to use best the individual and social factors in a problematic situation, first, the person ought to reason about the complexity of the problem and about the emotions he/she feels. Therefore, without an acceptable level of emotional intelligence we can not talk about resilience.

*Coping strategies.* The constant and long-term use of an adaptive coping strategy represents a predictor for the emergence of resilience (Martin-Breen & Anderies, 2011).

## **Research aims and methods**

Resilience is a timely concept in the field of psychology in Romania, but it can be rarely observed outside the academic field. Because of the subjectivity of the concepts associated with resilience (well-being, challenges, protective factors, risk factors), we considered that an insight from the target population with respect to the concepts we operate with is necessary (Study 1). The existing research offer numerous reviews published in the last years, approaching the concept of resilience from a general, but also from a specific point of view. Nevertheless, the existing reviews in the literature do not discuss the different perspectives that authors take on psychological resilience (resilience as an input, output or as a process). In addition, they also do not investigate the possible particularities that resilience can have depending on the intensity or the quality of the aversive situations. Our intention was to clarify these aspects (Study 2), so that to identify valid arguments in choosing the evaluation instruments and in the building and implementation of resilience development programs for youngsters. Consequently, we decided to build and validate an instrument that would offer quantitative and qualitative data (Study 3). In order to offer support to youngsters, we need to know the factors that determined the increase in their scores. Resilience as a process means successfully using the resources that a person holds. Such information is useful for a counselor or a therapist, in order to design an individualized program, which would answer to the specific needs of the client. Beyond the operationalization of the concept of resilience, that would serve the building of research methods, we considered important to understand the dynamics of the resources, the protective factors used by a person in the manifestation of resilience (Study 4). From this point of view, our aim was to identify what happens with a person that does not dispose of the resources that were empirically found to be important predictors of resilience. In fact, our interest was to explore if a perfect combination of resources that determines resilience exists, or if these resources have certain particularities in manifesting in each individual, so that we cannot find a general solution but rather individual factors that have specific manifestations in particular situation for each individual. Once the key concepts of the research have been clarified, we built a program for developing resilience in youngsters, based on the dynamics of the protective factors that we identified in the first studies of the research. The program has been tested against other existing programs and that youngsters had manifested interest in participation. The proposed activities are based on principles that have been identified in theoretical and empirical studies, but it has a major advantage in the design of the activities, so that it targets the protective factors identifies as necessary for any person or situation, and at the same time it follows an individual developmental path of the resources that each person owns (Study 5).

## **The research studies**

### ***Study 1 – Investigative research***

Although we cannot posit that it is a new concept in psychology, having a history of over 50 years already, the controversy on the concept of resilience continues including at a terminological level (Bayden & Mann, 2005; Castro & Murray, 2010). The main reason is the fact that resilience is sensitively dependent on the context in which the individual develops (Brady, 1993). Moreover, resilience is in direct relation with the interpretation that an individual gives to the reality. The cultural, social, educational, financial differences determine the varied factors that resilience is composed of, determining differences in the risk perception and evaluation of balance (Kemmen, 2004; MCKune, 2010).

The present research is an exploratory study aimed at identifying the cognitive schemata that the Romanian youngsters have on the challenges that they encounter and on their well-being, on the balance that they want to regain after overcoming the age-specific problems. The design of the study is qualitative, based on focus-group meetings and individual semi-structured interviews.

The participants were emergent adults, aged between 19 and 24 years ( $M = 21,3$ ;  $SD = 1,4$ ) and adults between 26 and 32 years of age ( $M = 28,5$ ;  $SD = 2,1$ ). The second category of participants represents persons that work with youngsters in different programs, projects, or educational activities.

In the study we used an interview guide that was common in the focus groups and in the individual semi-structured interviews. The questions were developed based on the items of the existing resilience scales. In the development of the items we took into account to resilience scales: Student resilience scale (Sun & Stewart, 2007) and Resilience scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993). The interview guided all the focus groups and the individual meetings.

The answers were analyzed through thematic analysis, as described by Hayes (2000). The analysis revealed nine major themes: (1) the perception of personal problems as momentary inconveniences, (2) the need of “recipes” in transition periods, (3) family represents a source of support for serious problems, (4) friends represent a source of support for simple problems, (5) “depression” – the emotion associated with problems, (6) balance

means happiness/ joy, (7) balance is associated with peace, (8) regaining balance happens through effort and trust, (9) regaining balance depends on the social network.

## ***Study 2 – Resilience - theoretical review***

In the last years the concept of resilience has received a major attention in psychology research. Resilience is a complex construct, and its definitions are diverse, each author trying to give a meaning to the concept (Kaplan, 2005). Some authors defined resilience as a personality trait (Finn & Rock, 1997; Floyd, 1996), others defined it as the premises or the result of a process, whereas an important category of researchers focused on defining resilience as a process (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Lantieri, 2008; Rutter, 2008).

Based on the existing literature at this moment, the present research aims at clarifying the concept of resilience, identifying the defining aspects in approaching resilience in young adults. In conclusion, our aim is to do a literature review on (a) the most frequent definitions of the resilience construct in the past 10 years, (b) the way in which resilience was operationalized, and (c) the protective factors associated with this construct. This literature review is based on published studies in English between 2000 and 2011.

A total of 912 articles were matched with the search criteria. Each of these were analyzed with respect to the inclusion and exclusion criteria and a number of 81 articles were taken into consideration for analysis.

One of the major results of the present study was the identification of the similarity between approaching the concept in the context of trauma and outside this context. The major differences were observed at the level of categories of approaching resilience in terms of: input, process, and output. In this case, the differences are of major importance at the level of the evaluation instruments. When we approach resilience as a process, we need to differentiate the concept from the coping strategies or emotional intelligence (Edward & Warelow, 2005). Resilience defined as an output faces a different obstacle, because it needs to be defined what exactly is considered to be positive adjustment and in which contexts positive adjustment can be considered as something unusual (Ungar, 2011). When defining the concept of resilience, it is mandatory to differentiate the concept from the related constructs and it is needed to remain constant in the definition that was adopted. If resilience is considered to be an input, an output or a process without making a clear choice, it is practically impossible to be assessed (Smith, 2006).



### ***Study 3 – Assessing resilience among young adults – Youth Resilience Measurement***

The existing studies propose standardized instruments for the assessment of resilience, but they are composed of subscales from the instruments that appraise well-being, perceptions on the resources that an individual holds or the way in which challenges or aversive situations are interpreted (Goodman, 2001). Although they are named as instruments for the assessment of resilience, many of them manifest problems with respect to the construct validity or content validity, actually measuring protective factors and/ or risk factors with impact on the positive adjustment (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011).

We analyzed different existing instruments in the literature, that aim at assessing resilience, but the majority offers exclusively quantitative data on the concept (Resilience Scale – Wagnild & Young, 1993; Individual protective factors Index – Springer & Phillips, 1997) or they represent subscales of questionnaires that appraise, in fact, other concepts than resilience (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Goodman, 2001).

Our major interest is to develop and validate an instrument that offers at the same time quantitative (in order to discriminate between persons who show resilience and persons who do not), and qualitative data (in order to understand which are the protective factors that ensure resilience in each person) with respect to resilience in young adults.

Using a mixed methodology, we identified 41 items that constitute a questionnaire for the quantitative data collection, 20 used through the Q-Sort methodology and seven situational questions, altogether offering a complex view on the resilience competencies. The results of the study are based on defining resilience as a process through which youngsters achieve subjective well-being. This process of regaining well-being is associated with the capacity of developing coping mechanisms, of adapting them and choosing the most adequate known strategy with respect to a given problem. The instrument was validated on a sample of 400 youngsters ( $M = 21.4$ ;  $SD = 1.7$ ). We tested the quantitative scale for fidelity and for each subscale we obtained satisfactory coefficients: rational thinking (16 items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), coping strategies (8 items,  $\alpha = 0.71$ ), family support (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.74$ ), social network (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.74$ ), and community support (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.68$ ). The present study proves the importance of approaching an assessment instrument from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Of course, the idea of using a mixed methodology in evaluation instruments is not new (Berry,

1980; Mertens, 2003, 2007), but, for now, it is not very popular in resilience assessment. The instrument that was built gains importance through its necessity in the evaluation of prevention programs that aim at developing resilience.

#### ***Study 4 – Thoughts giving compensatory coping for developing resilience***

The attention of the researchers in the field of resilience began to be directed more and more towards the protective factors. This idea is not a new one – in 1985, Gramezy defined three major categories of protective factors that contribute significantly to the positive development of the individuals: personal characteristics (individual), familial support, and the support offered by the environment outside the family (organizational support, community support). The protective factors that are most commonly considered are the social networks in which the individual functions (Rozanski, Blumenthal, & Kaplan, 1999), the adaptive coping strategies that he knows and uses (Holahan, Holahan, Moos, & Moos, 1995), high self-efficacy in overcoming moments of crisis (Hays, Steffens, Flint, Bosworth, & George, 2001), intellectual capacities (Luthar, 2003).

The present study was built in two stages, each of them being detailed in the methodology section. The aim of the first stage was to investigate the coping strategies used with a compensatory role in the absence of positive factors like emotional stability. In the second stage of the study, the major interest was to investigate the way in which compensatory coping strategies function and the context in which these strategies can be considered to be adaptive on a long term.

The present study brings forward interesting results, through paralleling them with the literature in the field. The studies conducted by Davey (2003) brought forward a revolutionary aspect in the study of resilience. Davey proved the fact that resilience is not based on a set of predefined predictors and that the absence of a predictor does not automatically mean the absence of resilience competencies. At a quantitative level, together with his team, he demonstrated how the lack of emotional stability does not automatically mean the lack of resilience competencies. In the present study, we sought to identify the mechanisms that make the presence of the resilience competencies possible, even in the absence of a strong predictor (emotional stability). What we succeeded in identifying using the qualitative methodology were the compensatory coping strategies that youngsters use for diminishing the possible negative consequences of a personality trait like neuroticism. Social support as a preferred

copied strategy by youngsters scoring high on neuroticism represents a surprise in the context of the existing data in the literature – neuroticism being unrelated to the trusting others. This controversy determined us to analyze the results more carefully, and, for the whole sample of participants (320 youngsters) the correlation between neuroticism and the preference for social support as a coping mechanism is not significant. We could identify this correlation only in the situation in which the sample of participants was restricted to the group with high scores on resilience.

### ***Study 5 – SELF-R. Developing Resilience using Rational Emotive Trainings***

The existing programs for the development of resilience targets protective factors identified in the literature, like social support (Luthar, 2000), self-efficacy in problem solving (Hays, Steffens, Flint, Bosworth, & George, 2001), behavioral coping mechanisms (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). Each of these factors relate to punctual situations, without necessarily taking into account trans-situational vulnerabilities. A rich experience in problem solving, high self-efficacy in this field can help a person remaining calm in a crisis situation, but the manifested self-control can be the result of an adaptive coping mechanism only on a short term – avoidant coping, for example. In this context it is difficult to discuss about what protective factors really represent. But, starting from the basic principles of EREC, a rational type of thinking can help youngsters use the protective factors they hold in an adaptive manner, on a long term.

Based on the information found in the literature, we proposed a program for the development of resilience in young adults, a program that is based on the principles of rational-emotive behavioral theory – SELF-R (Social Emotional Learning Facilitator for Resilience).

The SELF-R program was tested in each of its three modalities: the complete program, the online version, and the face-to-face version, out of which the complete version and the face-to-face version showing a statistically significant impact in the development of resilience in young adults. The program was tested comparatively with other programs offered to the youngsters for the development of strengths and in comparison with a control group, on a sample of 400 youngsters. Results showed that the program shows a statistically significant higher impact on the development of resilience, in comparison with the other programs. At the same time, an interesting result of the present study drew attention on the necessity of

longitudinal studies with respect to testing resilience. The punctual evaluation of the field, in a cross-sectional study has a hidden vulnerability as a limit, an idea which is sustained in the international literature.

Using regression analyses, we observed the fact that self-acceptance, accepting others and frustration tolerance explain 0.38 of the variance of resilience, a high enough percentage for taking into account these three variables when designing trainings for the development of resilience in youngsters.

Another verified hypothesis was with respect to the influence of personality traits in the preference for certain types of activities, a certain structure according to which programs for youngsters are built. The result obtained (176.81) showed that there is a significant association ( $p < .001$ ) between the dominant personality trait and the preference for a certain type of program. The influence that the personality trait has on the choice of a certain type of program is considered to be of medium strength ( $V = 0.31$ ). This explains the fact that, although with a statistically significant importance, the personality type cannot be considered a decisive factor in the preference of a certain program structure.

## **Final conclusions**

The research conducted for the present doctoral thesis is a pioneering one. Although resilience cannot be considered a new concept in the literature, linking it with the principles of REBT is innovative. The importance of the present research is relevant for each of the four levels at which we add to the existing theoretical and empirical data, bringing forward new ideas.

First, the concept of resilience is defined in the Romanian cultural and socio-economical context, through the information brought by the youngsters with respect to the way they perceive the changes in their lives, the balance, and the process through which they manage to regain an emotional balance, to show positive adjustment. The existing literature offers to a little extent to the target population the opportunity of defining and explaining through the personal experience each of the concepts that are aimed. Most of the times we take concepts from the international literature and we expect that the functioning mechanism is the same in our cultural context. Such assumptions are not entirely wrong. A lot of processes work identically or very similar, regardless of the culture in which we identify them. But, when approaching the personal view on life (well-being, change, adversity,

problems, successes), it is a utopian assumption that the results obtain in another culture will apply automatically in ours. Equally important is the fact that we take into consideration a society that is in continuous change. Hence, results obtained in the first study bring forward differences between the perception of youngsters between 26 and 32 years of age on what positive adjustment means and the perception of youngsters between 19 and 23 years of age. Through the manner in which we structured and conducted the present research, we offered the target population the opportunity of expressing their view on the premises they go through life with, as well as the results followed throughout development.

On a theoretical level, the present research contributed to the literature through its focus on individual and social resources, and, more importantly, on the way these are used by youngsters in order to prove resilience in different moments in life. At the same time, in this direction, we showed the manner in which the principles of REBT play a major role in the development and manifestation of resilience. Approaching resilience from a cognitive-behavioral perspective is rarely found in the studies published in the field of psychology. The dynamics of the protective factors represents a subject of debate. In the studies conducted so far, we identified a series of protective factors, but too few publications focus on how much of the variance of resilience can be explained by these factors and how a person reacts in the absence of the factors with a major impact in the development of resilience. On a theoretical level, we added to the already undertaken in the literature, drawing attention on the necessity of linking resilience with the principles of REBT.

On a methodological level, the present research brought a contribution through the development of an instrument for the assessment of resilience that aims at obtaining quantitative and qualitative data. To date, we do not know of instruments for the assessment of resilience adapted for the Romanian youngsters. Moreover, the existing instruments in the international literature focus on appraising protective factors or positive adjustment, even in situation in which the term “resilience” is incorporated in the title. When instruments really appraise resilience, the major problems reside in the fact that the information obtained is exclusively quantitative. The instrument differentiates between persons who show resilience and those who do not. But, what is lacking is the information with respect to what is behind a lower or a higher score in resilience. In this research, one of the studies proposes an instrument for the assessment of resilience in young adults, aiming at obtaining both scores for the dimension aimed, but also concluding information with respect to what a score means.

The literature in the field of resilience in psychology is poor in empirical studies. The majority of studies are of theoretical nature or they discuss interventions on a too general

level, so that they cannot be replicated. The majority of reviews and meta-analyses that focus on the concept of resilience are of qualitative nature because of the lack of empirical studies. In addition, the programs in the literature that were proposed for the development of resilience are mostly addressed to children or populations that were victims of natural catastrophes. Regardless of the situation, the majority of cases show the results of programs integrated in the educational system or in the social system. Starting from the particularities of our target population – young adults – we built a program that does not depend on the academic field, because not all young adults are integrated in an educational system. Moreover, having the characteristics of the target group, specifically the lack of time and the low interest in primary intervention programs, we took into account the communication channels frequently used by the target group (e.g., online communication). On the one hand, we used face-to-face meetings for the development of specific competences, for heightening motivation to participate in the program, creating group cohesion, an optimal relationship between the trainer and the participants. These meetings were structured throughout a week, REBT trainings. On the other hand, we ensured continuity of the program by transferring the activities in the online medium in the second stage. Through this strategy we managed to involve a greater number of participants and to maintain them active in the program for a longer period of time. The duration of the program implementation is important for the effects to be for a long time. The existing studies on children and adolescents reached a consensus with respect to this issue. For the above mentioned reasons, we ensured the implementation of the program for an optimal period of time by using the online communication (trainer-participant and participant-participant communication).

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