What we learn from older people about resilience

Janine Wiles
Social & Community Health, School of Population Health
The University of Auckland
Ageing, Older persons and the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

• Address exclusion, vulnerability and intersectional discrimination against older people

• Go beyond treating older persons as a vulnerable group

• Recognise older persons as active agents of societal development
  • to achieve truly transformative, inclusive, sustainable development outcomes

• Lifecourse approach to ageing
  • protect and promote rights of older persons
What we learn about resilience from older people

Outline

• Resilience instead of vulnerability / success
• Resilience as contextual not just individual
• Complex pathways to resilience
• Rethink vulnerability, frailty → inTERdependence
“[my son] wanted me to go to full-time care and we had some words over it....but yesterday he said ‘I’m much happier now Dad’. I go to [his] twice a week and he comes here every day on the way home. He picks up the [newspaper] which I give him and it’s a system that works.”

“My good neighbours give me four cooked meals a week ... I pay them something, but they’re not out to make money. They’re good people.”

“... the lady comes in every Friday [for last eight years] ... She does two and a half hours, and I pay her, and we’ve become friends.”

(TH, male, non-Māori, 90 years)
Resilience

Cope
Bounce back
Flourish

Adversity
Resources & assets
Process

Individual
Environment
Resilience: Steering between perspectives

Biomedical approaches to ageing
- Ageing as decline, frailty, disease
- Pathology oriented

Successful ageing
- Maintain Cognitive & Physical function
- Avoid disease or illness
  - Active engagement

Resilience Ageing well
- Strengths perspective
- Explores EXPERIENCE of vulnerability (rather than avoidance)

Achievable for everyone, inclusive
Popular Measures of resilience

Wagnild and Young – 5 core values
- Strong sense of purpose, meaning, core values
- Perseverance, Determination to succeed (grit)
- Self-reliance
- Equanimity (Adjustment to challenge, resourcefulness, capability)
- Existential aloneness

Friborg etc Resilience Scale for Adults
- Personal competence
- Social competence
- Social support
- Family coherence
- Personal structure

Connor-Davidson Resilience scale
- Personal competence
- Acceptance of change and secure relationships
- Trust/tolerance
- Strengthening effects of stress
- Control
- Spiritual influences

…focus is on personal characteristics
Resilience as older people define it

- Can live with adversity AND be well
- Balance
- Time
- Different pathways
- Attitude ... AND resources
- Contributions

“I like this statement, ‘one can have illness or disability but still be healthy’. But you have to reach the place where you can accept that. ... my doctor reminded me, ‘you still have the basic disabilities and illness, and you’ve just reached a place where you’ve got it all in the right perspective’. Two years ago I couldn’t have”

(Joy, in interview)
Jane: If you get a funny knee and you have to walk with crutches, you can. There’s still life beyond the funny knee, isn’t there? And be able to take, to accept help, like Meals on Wheels if you can’t cook. To be able to accept that graciously rather than feel that it’s a charity. But you know, you accept help and if you can, give it back. Even if you only smile. Laurie: And I think you’ve got to be aware too of all the agencies around that can help you. Jane: Yes. And be prepared to take advantage of them.
‘Care for place’ – many ways older people contribute to their communities

Volunteering
- e.g., driving Meals on Wheels
- e.g., collecting money to support local causes
- e.g., painting out graffiti, helping in community gardens

Advocacy
- e.g., helping people with access to benefits or care entitlements
- e.g., representing to local state providers like housing committees, raising awareness
- e.g., legal action on environmental issues

Nurturing
- e.g., connecting and networking in groups and linking to other groups

Activism
- e.g., protests, letters to politicians, lobbying for better housing

“It is not just the existence of resources that matters, but the ability to negotiate access to them, and to convert resources into personally meaningful positive outcomes”

Diverse resources for resilience

• For Māori aged 80-90 years

• Active engagement in cultural practice ↔ better self-rated health & functional status

• Worse health associated with colonisation

What does this mean for gerontology nurses?

- Work WITH older people and supporters to support and maintain wellbeing
- Recognise, support, expand areas of strength and expertise
- Accept and support resilience as an ongoing process
- Help negotiate meaningful access to services and resources
- Encourage inclusion and connectedness

Source: Gardenorganic.org.uk
What we learn about resilience from older people

- Resilience as a useful way to move past vulnerability-success divide
  - Recognise adversity, challenges, complexity
  - And contributions & strengths

- Needs to include personal characteristics & external resources

- A process, takes time, ups and downs
  - Different pathways

- Rethink vulnerability, frailty, dependence
  - InTERdependence
Thank you and acknowledgements

- All our research participants
- Funders – HRC, NSC NZ
- Co-authors and co-researchers on projects