

Three steps to resilience

When Hugh van Cuylenburg went to teach in India he got a lesson in resilience. Now our schools and top sports teams want in on the secret.

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I really didn't want to go to India. I was happy in Melbourne. I had a fulfilling job as a teacher and a hometown brimming with opportunities to do the things I loved. If I was hungry I could walk to my favourite cafes. If I fancied a beer I could pull up a stool in my local pub and if I was craving social or psychological nourishment I was blessed with amazing friends and family. Why would I want to suddenly go to India?

Her name was Anjali. We'd met at university – she was also studying education – and I had fallen hopelessly in love. Anjali was half-Indian and half-Australian, and in 2008 she wished to go to India for half a year. I had just coached my beloved Melbourne University Cricket Club to a club championship, but as much as I wanted to stay home and focus on my cricket and my work at Fintona Girls' School, I soon found myself stepping off a plane into the madness that is Mumbai.

Anjali had been talking about doing some teaching in India, which led to us travelling to a remote village in the folds of the Himalayas in the far north of India to volunteer at a local school. Nothing could have prepared me for the beauty of the

Ladakh region. It sits on the edge of a high-altitude desert plain ringed by snow-capped peaks that reach into a vivid blue sky. The villagers look more Tibetan than Indian, and they struck me as the nicest, most gracious people I had ever met. The school principal was good enough to put us up in his home, a modest mud hut. Like everybody else in the village we slept on the floor.

The mud-brick school rose unremarkably out of the hard, dry Himalayan desert plain. It was a fairly basic institution; most classrooms had only one table and one chair for the teachers, while the 150 students, ranging from four to 16 years of age, sat on the dirt floor. The children were well behaved, quiet and attentive. But there was something else: every one of them seemed to be in great spirits every day. They radiated happiness. Early in our stay the principal assigned four Year 3 boys to show me around the grounds. The first stop was the play equipment. Never before had I seen such a depressing sight in a school playground: a swing set and a seesaw that would have looked at home in post-meltdown Chernobyl.

My little tour guides stood in front of this haphazard tangle of useless metal and jerked their thumbs at it. “Hey sir,” they said, “look at this.” They were excited and proud to show me their amazing play equipment. They didn’t need it to work the way it had been designed to; they invented different games to play on it, including swinging on the rusty chains or just hanging off them for as long as they could.

I was besotted with all of the children at the school, but one boy stole my heart. His name was Stanzin, he was nine years old and he remains the kindest person I have ever met. The first time I walked into Stanzin’s classroom I didn’t notice how low the doorframe was and I smacked my forehead upon entry. When I walked back into the classroom the following day, little Stanzin was standing near the doorway with a big smile on his face. He pointed at the top of the doorframe. He had found a length of cloth and filled it with sand and leaves, then tied it to the spot where I’d nearly knocked myself out the day before. Then he smiled and beckoned me to look down the hallway. He had rigged each doorway he deemed a danger to me with some kind of DIY padding.

I soon realised I wasn’t the only person Stanzin showed a genuine concern for. If he ever noticed one of his classmates was alone at lunchtime, he would stop what he was doing and go straight over to them. “Are you all right?” he would ask. No matter what was going on in his life, Stanzin would put it to one side in order to

help someone else. “This kid,” I said to Anjali, “has got to be the most caring, selfless and truly happy person I’ve ever met.”

One night I found myself wandering the streets of the village and as I made my way back to the mud-brick home we were staying in, I saw something that changed my life forever. It was my little mate Stanzin in his school uniform, getting ready to go to sleep. I went over to him and said hello. He was sleeping on the ground in basic conditions, like many other people in the village. He had a huge smile on his face. I smiled back at him as I said goodbye and turned around to head home, all the while fighting an overwhelming urge to cry.

I didn’t sleep a wink that night. I thought of all the people I knew back home in Australia, and the students I’d taught over the years who’d struggled with depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses. Why were we in the developed world so broken? Why were we in Australia, such a privileged country, so anxious and depressed? So many questions were bouncing around in my mind.

It wasn’t just Stanzin who seemed to have found the secret to happiness; virtually everyone I got to know in this remote village was the same. I’m not suggesting that people in developing nations don’t struggle with mental health, but I did know that there was something very special about the attitude of these villagers.

Stanzin would turn up to class each day with a notebook and a pencil, and so did I – in order to take notes on him. I kept a very close eye on what he did each day and studied his patterns of behaviour. One lunchtime, as they were running out to play, I walked over to Stanzin as he was lacing up his shoes. “Sir, look. Look!” he said, pointing at his feet. “Sir, dis!” In Ladakh, people find it almost impossible to make the “th” sound with their tongue pressed behind their teeth, so I knew - Stanzin was saying “this”.

Not all of his friends had shoes. Stanzin must have owned his cherished pair for a couple of years because, as his feet had grown, he had cut the ends off the uppers to allow his toes to protrude. It wasn’t just shoes that families struggled to afford. Most kids didn’t have anything to bring to school for lunch, so each day we fed them plain rice. The way Stanzin and his friends reacted when presented with a bowl of rice, you’d have thought they were eating chocolate cake. “Sir, dis! Dis!” Stanzin would say, pointing at the bowl between mouthfuls. In other words, “Sir, how good is it that we get lunch at school?”

Another thing I noticed the villagers did was meditation. Between 8.30am and 9am, before classes started, the students would assemble in the yard where they would sit in silence and focus on being in the moment. “So, they’re praying are they?” I asked a teacher. “No,” he said, “they’re doing meditation.” It was optional – but every child turned up early because they didn’t want to miss out. There had to be something in that.

The people of the village weren’t impervious to trauma, sadness, hardship and loss, of course, but they dealt with the vicissitudes of life differently to the way I’d been used to. After three months there, I felt I understood why they were such a happy community. Ultimately, there were three principles they practised every day that were key to their resilient world view and happy disposition: gratitude (the ability to pay attention to what you have instead of worrying about what you don’t have); empathy (the ability to feel what another person is feeling) and mindfulness (the ability to focus on the present moment). Villagers faced daily hardships and pressures, often more acute than most of ours in the West, but they managed their responses differently.

The trip was a watershed in my life. As much as I had loved my time on the subcontinent, I was excited to return to Australia. I was desperate to get back into the classroom so I could integrate all of these lessons into my own teaching. In 2010 I started studying part-time for my Master of Education at RMIT. The course offered a lot of autonomy, so I was able to structure my learning around student mental health and wellbeing. One of the first things I studied was gratitude. When I read the work of renowned American psychologist Martin Seligman, I nearly fell off my chair. Widely known as the founder of positive psychology, Seligman showed that we can, in effect, retrain our brains so we feel happier on a day-to-day basis. In a classic study, he and other researchers described a simple technique: to write down three things that went well each day, every day, along with an explanation for why each good thing happened.

Seligman’s research chimed with my experiences in India. I had seen Stanzin routinely accentuate the positives in his daily life, only he went one step further: he noted these *in the moment*. He stopped what he was doing and pointed to whatever he was grateful for in any given moment: “*Dis!*”

Not long after I’d returned (and devastated by a break-up with Anjali), I got chatting with a former colleague at Fintona about my experiences in India. “You should

come in one day and give a talk to my class,” she offered. A week later I was back in front of the girls I’d taught a year earlier. I hadn’t prepared what I was going to say; I just hoped to illustrate the ways the kids in India experienced school as opposed to the Fintona girls with their amazing facilities. Gauging from the silence in the room and the wide-eyed looks on their faces when I finished, they took it in.

Though I’d never done anything like it before, I discovered I loved sharing such a positive message with children. It was the first step on a long road that would eventually lead to the creation of what I called The Resilience Project. Thanks to this word-of-mouth chain, I was soon speaking at 10 schools a week. I invested all the money we had made from the talks into the development of a curriculum and we also produced 21-day and six-month wellbeing journals for adults. By the end of 2014, The Resilience Project had been adopted in 500 schools across the country. And early this year, our schools program manager informed me that in 2019 we would have 110,000 kids involved with our curriculum or presentations.

On a stinking hot Saturday afternoon in February 2015 I was padded up and ready to go in to bat for Melbourne University. We had a young new player in our side and his dad had come along, so I wandered over and introduced myself. His name was Brian Phelan and after chatting for a while he asked what I did outside cricket. I told him about The Resilience Project. “You should come to my work and speak,” he said. Brian worked at the Melbourne Storm rugby league club and I figured he wanted me to talk to members of the club’s back-end staff. Two days later, Brian phoned as promised. I asked him, “Who is it you want me to talk to exactly?”

“To the players!” he said. “I’m the player welfare manager.” A few days later I arrived early at the Storm’s home ground at AAMI Park. After Brian’s introduction, I managed to park my nerves and launch into my presentation. About five minutes in, I realised I had totally underestimated the power of the message; the players looked completely engaged, leaning forward and listening intently to every word. Brian later informed me that club leaders Cameron Smith, Cooper Cronk and Billy Slater wanted the program to be rolled out across the entire club. All of them championed The Resilience Project and wove GEM (gratitude, empathy and mindfulness) not only into the fabric of their club but into their personal lives, too. I was thrilled the day Slater sent me a message asking for a couple more resilience - journals so his family could get stuck in as well.

Over the next seven months I spent a week with each NRL club. The guys seemed to be captivated by the stories about Stanzin and his appreciation for everything he considered good in his life. They loved the idea of being so grateful to have basic comforts that one might point to them and say, “Dis!” I asked some Storm players if they’d like to do the “Dis Challenge”, which had proven popular in schools. “It’s simple,” I said. “Over the next 24 hours, whenever you see something you’re very grateful for – I don’t care where you are or who you’re with – I’d like you to stop, point to it and say ‘Dis!’” They were keen to give it a go.

The Resilience Project started to attract a bit of publicity during the time I worked with the NRL, so it wasn’t a great surprise when some clubs in the AFL sought our help in player welfare. One of the first teams I spoke to was the Richmond Football Club. I arrived at Punt Road Oval armed with copies of our 21-day wellbeing journal. After I delivered the talk, the players filed past and took a journal each from the pile. When star midfielder Dustin Martin walked past he looked at me and then at the stack of journals, grabbed 10 and left. Exactly 210 days later, I received a text message. I didn’t recognise the number. “Hi mate,” it read. “Finished the journals. Can you please send me some more? It’s Dusty.”

“Sorry, Dusty who?” I texted back.

“It’s Dustin Martin, Richmond Football Club. Every day I write down all the things that go well for me, the things I’m so grateful for. It’s unbelievable how much it has changed me but I don’t want to miss another day. Can you please send me some more journals?” Earlier this year, Dustin and I spoke at a conference together. He told the audience he was up to 1086 consecutive days of doing the Resilience - Project journal.

At Collingwood Football Club, too, the story of Stanzin made a huge impact on the players. One day I noticed captain Scott Pendlebury had posted a photo on social media with the caption, “Dis moment #gratitude.”

“What’s that about?” I asked when I saw him.

“That little boy you told us about,” Pendlebury replied. “I really loved that story. I’m living out my dream with footy, but we can all get stuck thinking about the negatives in life. His story has really helped me to see the positives. And by the way,

next time you're watching, pay close attention to Adam Treloar. If you can get a photo of his wrist, just have a close look."

"How come?" I asked.

"Just have a look."

It turned out that after the Resilience Project talk, star midfielder Treloar – who has since revealed he's battled severe anxiety during his career – had started writing "DIS" in large black letters on his wrist strapping before every game, tapping his wrist and saying to himself, "Adam, you are blessed". When I saw him next, I asked him what made him feel blessed – was it being grateful to play AFL in front of all those people? "I live in Australia," he replied. "We get food, we get water, we get shelter. I remind myself of that whenever I get stressed. 'Dis' means this life in this country, every day."

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