



## Resilience building has a hidden cost

11 September, 2015 By [Sara Williams](#), [Dr Jane Keep](#)

Focusing on specific leadership qualities like resilience has consequences that could delay the inevitable - dealing with the reality of the current state of the NHS, write Sara Williams and Jane Keep

By introducing this focus on developing ourselves into “happy”, “positive” leaders one could argue that we are merely buoying ourselves away from, and in effect delaying, what is inevitable – the call to deal with the reality of our current state of play.

‘Anyone in a leadership role in the NHS right now is likely to be feeling squeezed’

Anyone in a leadership role in the NHS right now is likely to be feeling squeezed – whether it is conflicting priorities, pressures to deliver, the need to respond to external bodies, or staying steady in the daily toil of a busy, demanding work environment.

We frequently hear “this is the busiest time yet”, or “it’s never been as demanding as it is now”, and “at this current time, this maybe so”.

Whether it is or not, clinical and non-clinical leaders have an important role to play in the delivery and future shape of the NHS – and they are the steady statesmen/women on whose “watch” the NHS currently is.

- [Sawbridge: If the government really wants to help it must support NHS staff](#)
- [What does ‘compassionate leadership’ mean?](#)
- [The four steps to capitalise on talent management in the NHS](#)

### The art of being resilient

In recent years, there has been much in the way of specific leadership qualities, and one currently prevalent is “resilience” – not organisational resilience and critical planning, but the resilience of the leaders themselves during this time.



Sara Williams

There are toolkits, programmes, masterclasses, and articles on the topic – but is this “just the ticket” or are we missing something?

Take a look at what is often on offer within these articles or toolkits, and you will find: “have no fear”, “getting to peak performance”, “develop a mind of steel or an unbeatable mind”, “join the elite with gold medal strategies”, “courage to stand tall”, “mental toughness is the stuff of champions”, “hold yourself together, be gutsy”.

‘There is a hidden price to pay for this gutsy, fearless front’

And all of this within an NHS that is striving for a culture of compassionate care.

Listen to the chatter of NHS leaders and you may find that there is a hidden price to pay for this gutsy, fearless front:

- you push further and harder in extremely long working hours in order to deliver in excessively short timescales;
- you experience emotional outbursts (by some);
- feel vulnerable and fragile, yet carry a fear that to show this will risk being seen as weak and pathetic, or even unemployable;
- understandably you may develop a fear of speaking up or expressing concerns or feelings;
- sleep and appetite problems;
- exhibit an increasingly tired and weary face; and
- live with a starvation of compassionate care for yourself.

We know that we can find it hard enough to express concerns in some work environments – for example, a [BBC article](#) says: “Finding it hard to speak up in front of senior colleagues - even when it’s a matter of life or death - is something that can get in the way of openly pointing out errors. Even with teams who work very closely, like the crew on an aeroplane, junior staff have been known to keep quiet in an emergency rather than question the actions of a pilot.”



Jane Keep

Let alone expressing our own sensitivities, and vulnerabilities to our colleagues and leaders.

At the other end of the scale, an alternative to the “stiff upper lip” stoicism aforementioned, are the programmes and articles of recent years that have increasingly focused on strategies to “develop a positive mindset” and “be happy”, as evidenced in the incorporation of Michael Fordyce’s Happiness Programme work in some NHS

initiatives.

But is this move to balance the “hard” with the “soft” the way forward for effective leadership in the health service?

By introducing this focus on developing ourselves into “happy”, “positive” leaders one could argue that we are merely buoying ourselves away from, and in effect delaying, what is inevitable – the call to deal with the reality of our current state of play.

As the modern day philosopher Serge Benhayon astutely observes, in the end perhaps even this softer, happy approach serves the developing leader no better than toughening up – “optimism: choosing not to feel what is really going on.”

## Sensitivity matters

Given the NHS is awash with resilience building exercises and the promotion of this culture of stoicism, does mental toughness, or having a positive mindset actually work in these environments? Or is there another way?

Is there a way that may initially seem counterintuitive given the current culture within not only the NHS but broader society?

We propose that the way forth is one that does not follow this drive to be evermore resilient, but instead is far more supportive of developing a culture of compassionate care based on the acceptance of “sensitivity” as one of our greatest strengths.

‘Sensitivity is synonymous with being capable of feeling or having awareness’

When sensitivity – the ability to feel – is known, by its true definition as being synonymous with being capable of feeling, or having “awareness”, as opposed to the dominant view whereby someone who admits to “feeling” is judged as a person of weakness, then we have within all of us a fundamental component of understanding in relationships.

It is the development of this quality inherent in us all – the sensitivity to feel, that underpins the depth of our awareness in relationships, and that is the seed of true power in leadership, where truly understanding people is at the heart of a successful leader.

It is also the foundation of compassionate care.

**Sara Williams is a complementary health clinic director and principal practitioner of universal medicine therapies; and Dr Jane Keep is a hospital manager in the NHS and senior lecturer at Birmingham University**

## Readers' comments (23)

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[Dragana Brown](#) 11 September, 2015 1:21 pm

Our medics and our NHS staff need all the help they can get, what with people getting sicker and sicker and more pressure to perform faster and more efficiently.

But in all this we seem to forget about our own treasure - the very people who are at the providing end of our health care services.

This article offers a big picture and goes to the root where the game truly needs to be changed.

Extremely well written piece that we should do well to heed!

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[Beverley Bulmer](#) 11 September, 2015 5:50 pm

We generally view the NHS as a body dedicated to care and so it makes perfect sense for them to truly ensure the staff are cared for and that they have access to self-care programs that offer true support for their well-being. Compassionate care all round.

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- [Suzanne Anderssen](#) 11 September, 2015 9:02 pm

Your article is ground breaking in that it is de-bunking the myth that resilience is a quality to being a good manager - it seems sensitivity is a far more suitable quality. Being capable of feeling and being aware of what is truly going on will achieve far more positive outcomes and improve relationships in business, not toughening up and hoping for the best. A great perspective of the big picture, thank you.

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- [Zofia Sharman](#) 11 September, 2015 9:44 pm

Super poignant quality you draw on here in this article about SENSITIVITY in leadership - whether within the NHS or corporate world where I work. For me to have someone/leader/boss/manager who is this aware, is everything, because I feel understood by them and appreciative of this person's clear direction or read on not only myself, but also on the clear direction and read of the business too. It gives me confidence. Because when there is an aware focus on the person, so too is there an aware focus on the company. Sensitivity here definitely is a strength, not weakness in leadership. Super article. More please!

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- [Katerina Nikolaidis](#) 12 September, 2015 7:27 am

A very pertinent article about a worrying trend that absolutely misses the point, and takes us further away from addressing the real issues at hand. How can building resilience and developing toughness go hand in hand with providing a healthcare system of compassionate care? If we do not care for ourselves (for how can we if we set out to toughen ourselves up), how can we offer this care to others?

Sensitivity has been bastardised and become synonymous with weakness, but this is so very untrue. Allowing ourselves to be sensitive in all areas of our lives, and that includes a leadership role no less, is what can truly support us. Allowing ourselves to be aware of what is going on, letting ourselves feel where people are at and what is needed -- that's the kind of leadership we need for a truly compassionate and efficient healthcare system.

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- [alys Cole-King](#) 12 September, 2015 10:54 am

This is an important article and I am delighted that the authors are highlighting the need to expand the discussion and move away from seeing resilience as 'mental toughness'. This resonates with the GMC bog written to accompany the GMC event on 'the resilient doctor' where the need for self-compassion is also highlighted as a key quality of resilience (<https://gmcuk.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/doctors-under-pressure-need-resilience-not-mental-toughness/> ) Although my blog was written from the point of view of doctors the themes are similar for all NHS and social care professionals. It is really heartening that this HSJ article promotes the importance of sensitivity and of recognizing vulnerability. seeking support is not a sign of weakness. It may be one of the bravest things someone ever does, and may even save his or her life.  
Thank you again for this great article!

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- [Sara Williams](#) 12 September, 2015 12:24 pm

Thanks for your comments, you all reflect the knowing we have, that hardening in mental toughness is in fact taking us further away from effective management, true leadership, and meaningful communication. Emotions/reactions hinder our access to true quality, 'our' quality = truth. If as a leader you want to read a situation clearly and action decisions that bring up the organisation and/or team as a whole, not just compartments here and there that you expend too much time and energy on trying to balance, then sensitivity (aka openness and awareness) to truly seeing what's before you will prove more productive in the end than steeling yourself (aka closing up) in the face of challenge or change. At the end of the day, encouraging sensitivity is encouraging people to be themselves, to remember and trust the strength of the quality beyond the protection built up in reaction to the world - a way of being that invigorates and inspires rather than exhausts and depletes.

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- [Chris Manning](#) 12 September, 2015 1:12 pm

Stalin and Hitler were both 'resilient'. I rest my case.

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- [Nico van Haastrecht](#) 12 September, 2015 4:35 pm

Your article is so needed in nowadays health care organisations. Resilience, stiffening the upper lip or having a positive mindset do actually not work as the current status of our health care systems clearly is showing on all levels of its organisations. We have to take care for our care managers and the carers on the work floor and the allow sensitiveness to enter these workforces as this will bring the true understanding and feeling of where we are at and what is needed to remain in service with our valuable health care system.

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- **Anonymous** 12 September, 2015 9:27 pm

Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficult situations and retain focus and direction it does not mean lacking in sensitivity - surely we want resilient, sensitive, and indeed compassionate leaders.  
If leaders aren't resilient they won't be leaders for long

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