

Resilience in Ministry in a Digital Era by Cias Ferreira.

Introduction

A simplistic definition of Resilience is the ability a person has to deal with complexity, turbulence and change in a healthy and productive way. The world we live in today is the most complex and turbulent any generation has ever been exposed to. The Internet has not been in existence for 50 years and already it has fundamentally changed the way people interact, think and do ministry. Research has only been able to catch up to the rise and influence of technology on human behaviour in the last 10 years. When the first i-Phone was released in 2007, no one knew the affect that these small devices would have on the health of individuals and societies. Let me just say from the start that I am not against technology. It has some wonderful benefits and some dangerous consequences all at the same time. I will always use it in my own life. We just need to become aware of the way it can affect our lives in the positive and negative sense of the word.

Previous generations where able to be more Resilient because they did not have an “always connected” lifestyle. Today Leaders go to bed with their mobile devices, having instant access to their emails, social media and communication with their teams. This has made communication easier but also have some other unintended consequences. The consequences have an effect on our mental and physical health, which in turn influences our ability in the work of the ministry.

Some of the positive affects of technology are our ability to communicate with loved ones who are far away. We can also share the gospel with others who have not yet heard the good news of salvation. In this global village we are able to get relevant information at the click of a button. Some of the consequences on the brain and body, which we will discuss include, not being able to get the appropriate amount of sleep because the brain only goes into the 5 phases of sleep 2 hours after its last interaction with a digital device. The brain not being able to process information affectively because digital media gives the illusion of multi-tasking, while the brain is actually made to be a sequential processor. Conflict handling and communication have been watered down because in the rush of instant results people tend to have crucial

conversations online and not face-to-face. The blue light of the screens hinders the digestion of food, which increases obesity.

Our mind, emotions and physical body play an important role in being healthy and productive. We know that our body is the temple of God¹. Productivity has unfortunately decreased; employees are productive only 30-40% of the time. Children's grades are drastically decreasing, even with less strenuous curriculum. Burnout causes ministry leaders to take extended leave while others just keep on moving forward without any healthy support through relationships. The more important the role of the person, the more the ministry will lose because of unintended leave. Leaders work on average more than 12 hours per day.

The effect of Technology on the brain

In the centre of the brain we get the "pleasure centre" or nucleus accumbens. This "pleasure centre" receives small amounts of a chemical called dopamine, which stimulates the area and we then receive a feeling of enjoyment. Dopamine is a necessary chemical for us to enjoy life. When we do the analogue type of activities small and appropriate amounts are released into the "pleasure centre". Coffee with a friend, journaling in a physical book and exercise all release dopamine. But with technology, it is different. Technology stimulates the brain with larger than normal quantities of dopamine in a shorter period of time. Neuroscience has compared it to cocaine use. They have discovered that the same amount of dopamine is released in someone using technology for extended periods of time (2 hours or more) as a traditional cocaine addict who sniffs one line of cocaine. The same areas light up in the brain and in the same intensity for traditional cocaine addicts and someone overusing technology. When the "pleasure centre" receives too much dopamine, it builds up a chemical barrier in order to protect itself. Because we enjoy these "dopamine drops" we want more. So we try and induce more dopamine by more intense activity on something specific that releases these dopamine floods. The activities that release these unnatural floods of dopamine are mostly digital activities. These floods of dopamine go beyond the current chemical barrier the brain has built,

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:16

so the brain builds a stronger chemical barrier. For adults the chemical barrier takes 1 hour to form. In children the chemical barrier forms instantly as the brain tries and protect the creative growth process in the brain of a child. This sequence of dopamine trying to go beyond the chemical barrier and the chemical barrier growing stronger, if not stopped, continues until the “pleasure centre” goes completely numb. This numbness is called anhedonia². In laymen’s terms, we call it a severe burn-out. A physical state in which a person isn’t satisfied with anything in life. A time in which no activity, no matter how strong will bring any pleasure to a person. A time where people do more harm to themselves, such as physical cutting, even to the bone, because they just want to feel something. I have personally seen people in ministry in this state, who has such incredible potential as an individual, not even having the strength to eat, or brush their teeth.

Not receiving these hints of dopamine also causes anxiety and fear. Many are familiar with the term FOMO "fear of missing out". These dopamine rushes have also resulted in digital dementia, more commonly known as Alzheimer’s, and boredom.

Discipline: The effects of Technology on this Resilient Factor

One of the factors that build resilience within a person is the ability to apply discipline to sleep, eating and exercise.

Sleep

We all know our brain needs processing time. This happens mainly in our “Rapid Eye Movement” phase of sleep. The longer the brain can be in this phase the more can be processed. A healthy percentage is about 20% of the entire sleep cycle. Technology usage before bedtime hinders this process. How? Our eyes are ever alert of the light. When we usage technology just before falling asleep, our brain takes 2 hours to switch off and actually start its sleep cycle. If a notification goes off during the sleep cycle, the eye sees the light. It then alerts the brain that it needs to wake up because it compares it to the normal rising of the sunlight. We therefore don’t get enough deep sleep and over time we get into a deprived sleep cycle. This then leads to depression,

² Dr. Archibald Hart, Thrilled to Death, 2007

low self-esteem, an inability to solve problems and other negative effects. We all know we need to sleep about 7-8 hours a night to get healthy sleep in. Technology is stopping this sleep cycle. Some children cannot fall asleep without music. This causes them to never go through the full sleep cycle.

Eating

Technology usage, especially the blue lights of the screens, hinders the digestive system's functioning. This leads to an increase in belly fat and obesity. People also tend to eat faster, and are more rushed when it comes to making food. This leads to poor health decisions and food choices. People take food "on the go" not realising that this choice hinders the healthy intake of nutrients.

Exercise

Healthy movement are key to being able to serve God in the long run. The proper functioning of our heart is crucial to the health of our entire body. Excessive use of technology has lead to cardiac arrest or more commonly known as heart attacks. In South Korea there has been instances of people dying while playing video games for extensive periods of time³. Dion Chang mentions the increase of stress related symptoms because of excessive digital usage⁴. If people do not apply discipline to the amount of screen time they have, they tend to not go outside for a walk. They only sit in front of screens the whole day, which negatively affects their back and neck muscles and leg functioning. We need healthy amounts of time away from screens while taking in fresh air and enjoying the beautiful nature God made.

In a culture saturated with technology, Resilience in this area becomes more and more important. Technology decreases our ability to apply discipline to sleep, eating and exercise in our daily life. We need to apply healthy discipline in our life in order to build resilience that can take us through the unending complexity we face in today's world.

³ Abigail Elise, www.ibtimes.com "Gamer dies in internet café after three day gaming binge – hardly anyone noticed", 2015

⁴ Interview with Carte Blanche September 2015

Working with you skills: The effects of Technology on this Resilient Factor.

Focus and Faithfulness

God has given us all talents, skills and abilities, which He wants us to use faithfully⁵. In the digital era, the desire for instant gratification and success has led to many abandoning their God-given skills and gifting. In a world of constant multi-tasking, a person do not get time to truly focus on his or her skills and developing those skills in a healthy manner. Skill development is taking longer than it should. Individuals actually grow their skills at a slower pace. It takes many deliberate, focused hours to truly grow in a particular skill. When we focus on one task and skill at a time, we are allowing our brain to form new neural pathways. This leads to growth in our ability to use our skill. Have you ever thought why masters in a field are truly masters? Take a tennis player, for example. You don't see Andrew Murray checking his social media after every backhand he hits on the training grounds. He does not answer an email after every practice serve. So why do we do it in the ministry. Well the dopamine effect controls us so much that we cannot help ourselves and we feel we constantly have to check in on the world. The truth is constantly checking in on the world does not always help us to grow and become masters in our particular field of expertise. The truth is, the only person who will truly be able to grow their skill in this era is the person who can focus and not let anything distract them during that time period.

Boredom and Multi-tasking

Boredom has also lead people away from their skill development. They would rather check their social media than to focus on their skill development. In the digital era boredom sets in quicker, within 2-5 minutes. This boredom leads the person away from their current task to something else, which is normally some digital activity such as checking Facebook, Tweeting something, liking an Instagram post or watching a YouTube clip. Many will start to switch between different social media platforms, giving them the illusion that they are multitasking. But as Brad Huddleston puts it, it is rather called toggling⁶. Dr Caroline Leaf calls it milkshake-multi-tasking⁷. When we “multi-task” we are actually switching between many unfinished tasks, giving the illusion of digital multi-tasking. We are not talking about analogue multi-tasking, but

⁵ Matthew 25:14-30

⁶ Brad Huddleston, Digital Cocaine, 2016

⁷ Caroline Leaf, Switch on your brain, 2007

digital multi-tasking. Multi-tasking between washing the clothes and checking social media is also digital multi-tasking. The fact is that our brain is created to be a sequential processor. Our brain is made to transfer thoughts and information from our short-term memory to our long-term memory. When we finish one task at a time, the brain stores that cluster of information in a place in the long-term memory. But when we get bored and move from one unfinished task to another, without finishing a task, the brain stores all these snippets of information in different spaces in the long-term memory. This leads to decrease in comprehension and productivity. Another thing that fosters more multi-tasking is the unending beeps of notifications. Whether email, Facebook or Whatsapp. They catch our attention, while we are writing an article, as I am doing, at a meeting, or when you are busy preparing a sermon. We take the “bait” and quickly check the email or reply the Whatsapp without realizing that we have just switched tasks and our brain cannot process the previous task efficiently.

Meetings

Maybe you have been in those many unproductive meetings as I have been in. People on their laptop but “listening attentively”. I have experienced countless unproductive meetings. More than 80% of them, I believe are unproductive. Why? Because most of the people are not prepared for the meeting and they toggle constantly in the meeting, nodding when appropriate. Some meetings, even had YouTube videos as part of the creative search for ideas for the next product, which lead to more useless videos being watched by all, and minutes of potential productivity wasted.

If technology is not used wisely and in healthy parameters then it will influence skill development and personal growth in an unhealthy manner.

Healthy Relationships: The effect of Technology on this Resilient Factor.

Technology has made relationships shallow. People delete each other from Facebook and call it conflict handling. Few ministers have healthy mentors and relationships. We know that almost 70% of pastors feel alone in ministry. Technology drives us towards instant gratification, also in the area of relationships. Healthy relationships take time and investment to truly flourish. These key ingredients have been sold to instant rewards. If someone does not agree, we tend to delete them instantly from our

lives. Conflict handling, which forms a key part of the growth of relationships have been completely deleted. Research abounds on how few people are actually capable to handle conflict without any medium such as Facebook messenger etc. Conflict is seen as backstabbing and hatred, and no longer do we value the growth that healthy conflict provides us.

To be resilient in ministry in the long run, a minister should have at least 2 or 3 close relationships that are cultivated regularly.

Conclusion

We use our brain everyday. This is why we need to take precautionary measures to give our brain the right information, in the right amounts to be processed in the right way. As a fellow Christian and digital age citizen, I want to encourage you to build resilience into your life so that you can fulfil the ministry God has entrusted you with, as individual and church.

Questions:

1. What is the definition of Resilience?
2. What are the 3 Resilient Factors discussed in the article?
3. How does technology influence the Resilient Factors mentioned?
4. What can you do to live more Resilient as a Minister of the Gospel?
5. How could you support your leadership and church to be more resilient?

More information:

Checklist to see if you are using technology in a healthy way.

1. Do you get a healthy 7-8 hours of sleep at least 4 times a week?
2. Are you able to go without any technology for extended periods of time?
3. Can you complete one small task without being bored or having to do other things in between?
4. Do you truly pay attention while in a conversation or are you constantly thinking about what happens on social media while in the conversation?
5. Do you build healthy long term relationships with other ministers?

Tips to grow in your resilience.

Here are some tips to get some healthy boundaries in terms of technology usage.

1. Take a break from technology every 40 minutes for at least 10 minutes in order to give your brain a break. Do something analogue (non digital) within the break.
2. Stop digital device usage 2-3 hours before going to sleep.
3. Physical exercise helps to get rid of all the stress in our bodies. Do some exercise at least 3 times a week. Even if it is walking 20 minutes in the evening.
4. Train yourself to do one thing at a time.
5. Read physical books.
6. Delay any unhealthy instant gratification for at least one month.
7. Focus on growing one particular skill for one year.
8. Face conflict in the next month in a healthy way.
9. Find a group where you can be yourself and constantly grow.