

Resilience doesn't always mean persevering—it can be found in inaction and silence, too

March 16 2025, by Claire Fox



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Young people today face increasing levels of uncertainty. They're navigating volatile job and housing markets and contending with a future that's likely to be significantly marked by the climate crisis. [Evidence also indicates](#) that this generation is experiencing a sharp deterioration in mental health. [Developing resilience](#) is often hailed as the solution.

Resilience is typically framed as overcoming adversity and this tends to mean conforming to social norms. Staying in school, holding down a job, persevering no matter what. It's an individual virtue, which places an emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reliance.

But this conventional understanding of what it means to be resilient, and what we expect to see when we ask young people to be resilient, may be overlooking the hidden ways they adapt and survive. It dismisses [alternative responses](#), such as resistance, disengagement or inaction.

By redefining [resilience](#) to include different ways of adapting and the importance of support from others, we can create a more practical approach to handling uncertainty.

[My research](#) with colleagues has explored the unconventional side of resilience. It is based on interviews with 92 young people across four European countries, as well as further focus group discussions. It was part of a larger [a European study](#) of young people facing disadvantage across 10 countries.

To understand the experiences of these young people, we spent time with them in their own spaces. These included youth centers, protest groups and [online communities](#).

We held one-on-one conversations where young people shared their [personal experiences](#), thoughts and struggles. And we worked with them in creative ways, often within workshops or group discussions, so they

could help shape the research.

Through this work, we found that actions by young people that might ordinarily be dismissed as failures can actually be hidden, unconventional forms of strength and adaptation in their own right. They reveal broader, more nuanced versions of resilience.

[Take Liam](#), a 15-year-old in the UK who had been in care and was serving a community sentence. For Liam, school was a toxic environment filled with conflict and pressure from his peers and teachers. Although he was keen to achieve some academic qualifications and saw it as a source of pride, Liam made the decision to stop attending.

By leaving school, Liam reduced his risk of becoming drawn into problematic peer groups and criminal behavior. While some might see leaving school as giving up, from Liam's perspective it was a way to protect himself.

Samantha, at 24 years old, had experienced neglect from her parents and a [lack of support](#) from social workers. She often felt unheard and judged unfairly by those in authority, such as her social workers and educators.

Instead of disputing what they said, which had the potential to cause her a lot of upset and conflict, Samantha would quietly remove herself from those conversations. This might involve physically leaving the room, redirecting the discussion to a neutral topic, or simply disengaging emotionally by remaining silent.

What might seem like giving up was, for her, a form of resilience that protected her from further harm in the face of a system that had repeatedly let her down.

Learning to navigate uncertainty

The idea of promoting resilience among young people is to enable them to cope with living in an uncertain world. But young people often face issues that are impossible for them to overcome through their own efforts.

These can include unequal, limited access to quality education or stable job opportunities. They may be living in poverty and unstable housing, experiencing discrimination within education settings, social care or the criminal justice system. They may face inadequate [mental health](#) support, or the challenges of leaving the care system, such as insufficient preparation for independent living.

This is often coupled with limited access to supportive resources such as a lack of youth-friendly spaces or programs in underfunded communities. There may be insufficient availability of mentorship or guidance in schools, restricted access to affordable extracurricular activities, and limited pathways to secure housing or financial aid for young people transitioning out of care. Navigating these challenges cannot be addressed solely through personal effort.

Supporting resilience, then, can mean creating environments where they can safely explore options on [how to handle challenges](#) in a way that feels realistic and sustainable, make mistakes and learn how to adapt without fear of judgment.

At 16, Paco, from Spain, found himself in a self-managed youth club where young people decide on the youth workers they employ, the activities offered and how to engage with the neighborhood. It was aimed at supporting those who, like Paco, were not studying or in work.

The staff and his peers didn't just tell him what to do but listened to his

thoughts and ideas. Unlike other places where he felt judged, this place gave him a chance to explore his ideas without fear of unduly harsh criticism.

Rather than dictating what he should do or emphasizing rigid goals, people involved in the program actively listened to Paco's thoughts and ideas, creating a space where he felt genuinely heard.

This approach focused on building trust, empowering Paco to make incremental changes at his own pace. Paco was supported back into study—something that he felt much more enthusiastic about—and was confident in getting his life back on track.

Thinking of resilience in this more flexible way—one which allows for what might look like failure, or accepting help from a community—challenges an understanding of resilience seen in neoliberal thinking. This is a philosophy that champions individual responsibility and self-reliance and is often tied to economic productivity.

Instead of expecting young people to simply "bounce back" and thrive in times of adversity, we should support them in exploring sustainable, adaptive responses to life's challenges.

To equip young people to navigate an uncertain and challenging world, we need to recognize the value of [unconventional forms of resilience](#). It should be understood as a process that often arises in response to structural inequalities, [rather than a one-size-fits-all ideal](#) rooted in conformity and individual effort.

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