

Book Review

Amundsen and the Sudoku

Edina Kovács¹

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Bibliography of the reviewed book: Donders, P. Ch. (2019). *Resilience*. Harmat.

Introduction

Paul Ch. Donders is the CEO of Xpand International. He works in leadership development and executive coaching. One could not find anything about his qualifications or professional history. However, he is certainly an excellent salesman.

Review

The concept of resilience emerged in psychology in the 1980s. In short, it refers to the capacity for flexible psychological adaptation, the ability to cope with difficult external circumstances. According to some theories, it is not considered a personality characteristic, as one may adapt positively to a certain challenge, while in other situations one may be inflexible. Overall, recovering from traumatic events or behaving competently in stressful circumstances can be considered resilient. The concept of resilience started to become popular in the early 2010s. Probably due to its complexity and the vagueness of definition, there have been attempts to apply it not only to post-traumatic development but to essentially all areas of life.

Its popularity may have been helped by the fact that in the information society, knowledge and technology are becoming outdated faster than at any other time in previous decades. This creates constant uncertainty in the life of the individual: it is not only catastrophes or economic collapses that one has to fear, but constant change is part of everyday life. If stability cannot be experienced in the outside world, it can only be created within oneself, which is a difficult task.

Donders' book is one of the few on this topic available in English, and perhaps the first to be more widely available. Thus, there may be many who rely on it for guidance about resilience. For this reason, we have chosen to review this book and to give you an idea of whether or not it is worth building on. Donders is promoting resilience as a general solution: 'be resilient', he suggests, and then you can integrate every experience, every crisis, into your life as part of the growing process. By his definition, resilience is

“the ability to bounce back flexibly from difficulties and to learn from barriers and stressful situations. A combination of values, beliefs and a positive attitude that leads to better individual performance.”

In other words, someone who is resilient has appropriate coping strategies and is all-around confident - what other values and beliefs they hold is not clear from this definition. Not only here, but at several points in the book, Donders seemingly elegantly details, in empty phrases, that each person can imagine whatever they want. Moreover, according to the author, one of the main benefits of resilience is that it helps to prevent burnout: in the second chapter we are promised that the book will tell us exactly how this prevention is accomplished, but this too remains an empty statement. It is no wonder! For, burnout is defined as the emotional exhaustion caused by systematic emotional stress, with feelings of hopelessness and incompetence. Work-related motivation is reduced, and dysfunctional behaviors emerge. While realistic self-awareness and self-reflection reduce the risk of burnout and, at the same time, promote resilient behavior, there is no direct connection between resilience and burnout prevention, nor does the author show one.

¹ Perspectiva Nova Association, professional leader; kovacs.edina.12@gmail.com

As I mentioned in the introduction, Donders is the CEO of Xpand International. He works in leadership development and executive coaching, with offices in 13 countries. This is evident in the volume he has written: repackaged and attractively grouped, it presents many otherwise long-established knowledge elements in an attractive and novel way. Indeed, the book does not contain any knowledge that has not been represented by one of the modern psychological trends for at least 40-50 years.

For example, reconciliation with the past and positive acceptance of our life history is a major theme of narrative psychology. Since the 1980s, it has been concerned with how the social representations constituted by narratives enable us to adapt to our environment and cope with new situations. This knowledge is put to practical use in the methods of therapeutic writing and playback theatre, even in the therapy of psychiatric patients.

The importance of assertiveness, and in particular assertive communication, was first conceptualized in the 1960s in the field of cognitive psychology, and then, as emotional intelligence became popular, it became a fashionable concept in various training courses available today.

Risk-taking is also related to self-esteem, anxiety, and achievement motivation, and has also been an important topic in several areas of psychology since the 1960s, perhaps the best known of which are Atkinson's studies of achievement motivation.

Healthy relationships, having important supportive people in our environment, are also discussed by several psychological schools. Perhaps one of the oldest is the term created by J. L. Moreno in 1939, the so called 'social atom'. According to this view, the smallest unit in society is not the individual, but the sum of the individual and their important relationships that surround them - and if this 'atom' is depleted, the termination of social functioning occurs. Our relationship patterns can be changed through the social atom, tensions can be explored, and healthier boundaries can be established for ourselves if necessary.

And I will not even attempt to list the trends that deal with the importance of a realistic self-image and self-awareness, the list would be so long, and it starts in the decades after Freud's work.

In this context, it is worth reviewing the seven resilience factors listed by Donders.

- The first is reconciliation with the past and emotional stability: acceptance and awareness of one's life history, and increased self-confidence.
- The second is realistic optimism - the definition of this is strongly marked by the mentioned avoidance of specifics. According to Donders, appreciating what we have through a healthy self-confidence increases our self-confidence.
- Thirdly, problem-solving skills, which need to be developed by strengthening our assertiveness, so that we can focus more on our priorities.
- The fourth is to harness our individual abilities: if we can do this, we gain energy.
- The fifth factor is self-discipline and a healthy lifestyle: we need to move more, sleep longer, which will make us more energetic and improve our self-confidence.
- The sixth resilience factor is 'mindfulness and passion'. According to Donders, this is essentially influenced by the previous five factors, so that, for example, good problem-solving skills make us more aware, while our individual skills can be exercised with sufficient passion.
- The seventh factor is healthy relationships. Here too, the author lists a mix of all the ingredients:
 - for example, developing empathy and getting a massage. Communicate effectively and show interest in the other person. Have motivating friends and avoid "energy leeches".

Donders is not a scientist, not a researcher. In the introduction, he writes that he has read 'more than ten' studies on stress management and burnout in a few years. For anyone who seriously studies a field, this is quite laughable since no serious journal would accept a study with only ten references. This attitude characterizes the book as a whole: on first reading, all the statements seem very inspiring, but on closer inspection we find that there is a succession of information and opinions that are not necessarily related and are pieced together from here and there.

The book is very reader friendly. Donders constantly backs up his insights with stories about himself, Martin, the doctor, Amundsen, and a trophy rider. The chapter on realistic optimism, for example, begins with the author writing about soldiers captured during the Vietnam War. He quotes a study that says the most pessimistic of the soldiers were the first to die. After them, the optimists gave up, who for a while had high hopes of escape, but then ran out of steam. Those who survived the longest were those who took a realistic but positive view of the situation. All this sounds very convincing. But how do we really know who were the first to die in a Vietnamese prison camp? No reference to the study appears, so we can only assume that it is based on

survivors' accounts. If this is indeed the case, then interviews were conducted in which survivors with no knowledge of psychology describe their fellow survivors, obviously in a highly subjective manner. From this story, the author then concludes that we need to trust in others, in the 'goodness' of life, and in ourselves. To develop self-confidence, he suggests sports, or a hobby that we are passionate about. And the conclusion of the chapter is what I said above: if we appreciate what we have through healthy self-confidence, it will increase our self-confidence.

The chapter on problem solving is made up of similar jumps here to there. For two pages we read about Amundsen's expedition to the South Pole. Amundsen's achievement is a statue of resilience: he is focused, prepared, risk-taking, and problem-solving. The author also goes on to list ways in which the reader can acquire such resilience: practice assertive communication, develop sudoku and improvise by thinking outside the box.

Conclusions

The positive aspect of the book is that it suggests that we should strive to develop resilience, and if we have it, it offers answers to many of the problems in our lives.

How we can do this is explained to us in a nutshell: develop empathy, self-awareness, and self-confidence. Learn and practice assertive communication. Take time to organize events from our life history into a narrative that is positive for us. Let us work on our human relationships: correcting the patterns we have established that hold us back and developing those that support us. Make sure we are surrounded by enough supportive people. We should also be aware of which of our abilities are strongest and which we use most joyfully. Once we have that, let's find a job where we can use those skills.

If you are looking for answers in this book on how to do the above, you will be disappointed. Since it is not usually clear which psychological schools we are dealing with, it is not even advisable to use Donders' book as a guide, since we will not get answers to the question of which therapy or which method is most effective e.g., for developing empathy. We can certainly take part in one of the author's company's training courses if we are wealthy business leaders. But if we are not, we are on our own. We need to look for a method that is authentic, thorough, and suited to our own personalities. We are already closer to success if we do not look to the 'Resilience' book as a model of thoroughness.

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