

# Building resilience through trail running: A gender perspective

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine gender related differences in development of resilience through outdoor adventure, specifically trail running. Focusing on trail runners and using purposive sampling methods, 148 participants were recruited from online communities and asked to fill out an online survey [Google Forms].

Results revealed two important themes. First, despite historical underrepresentation of women in the wilderness, women used trail running to shape their identities as self-confident, brave and tenacious. Second, differences in the ways men and women built resilience were apparent. Women appeared to rely more heavily on their positivity, optimism and social network than the men.

Resilience is an important factor for many of the client populations that therapeutic recreation practitioners work alongside. Insight into the nuances of how resilience is developed and supported in individuals are key when it comes to fostering resilience with clients.

## Literature Review

### Defining Resilience

In Merriam-Webster (2018), resilience is defined as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change”.

According to the American Psychological Association “resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1).

Ann Masten suggests resilience is quite common, “an ordinary magic” (p. 30) that lies within each person and is drawn out in certain situations; however, “one’s degree of resilience is developed, at least in part, when one is exposed to stressful situations” (Shellman & Hill, 2017, p. 61).

### Gendering of the Outdoors

Overholt & Ewert (2015) posit outdoor adventure is “effective in enhancing levels of resilience because of a) spending time in pristine environments, b) separation from normal life, c) social support and d) the intensity and challenging nature of the experience” (p. 40). They suggest women experience risk and adventure differently than men, and that men and women experience and develop resilience differently from one another.

Historical differences in the ways that men and women access, experience and conceptualize nature are prevalent (Cosgriff et al., 2010). “Although women are seen as akin to nature, outdoor activities and pursuits have historically been masculinized and viewed as the preserve of men” (p. 19).

Pohl et al. (2000) argue “wilderness provides a context where women may go directly against the grain of what they have essentially been socialized to be” (p. 416).

## Research Questions

- ✓ How do men and women perceive and build resilience?
- ✓ Does gender play a role in the development of resilience?
- ✓ Does trail running explicitly build resilience for individuals, and are there gender differences?

## Participants

148 surveys were used for analysis. Of these, 82% (n=121) were female and 18% (n=27) were male. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 65, and had varied trail running experience of between one and forty years. Participants were from locations all over the world including across Canada, the United States, Germany, Italy, Australia and New Zealand.

## Research Methods

Participants were recruited using purposive, non-probability sampling from online trail running communities. The anonymous survey included questions regarding demographics, knowledge of resilience, and trail running history and habits.

Question responses were both numerical and textual. Coding was used as a labelling strategy for the textual data, and frequency tables used for the numerical data. A logbook was kept throughout the process as an audit trail, and peer debriefing was thoroughly utilized.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Women’s Wilderness Identities

Women in this study appeared to contribute much of their personal identity to trail running and outdoor adventure:

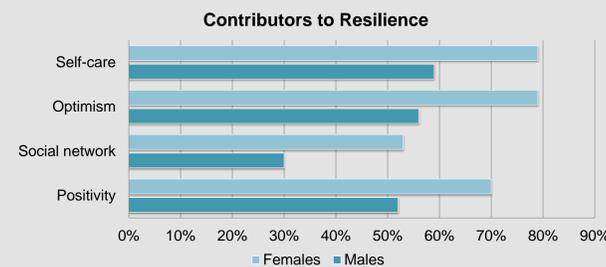
- ◆ **“The only reason I made it through and past (what I now realize was) depression was by putting miles and miles between me and my emotions. It remains the single way that I am able to maintain my emotional balance and mental clarity” (FP1).**
- ◆ **“It [trail running] makes me feel so happy. But there is also some underlying feeling of coolness. Like it’s so cool to do this!” (FP61).**
- ◆ **“It makes me a better person. I treat myself better, and I am kinder to those around me” (FP113).**
- ◆ **“Honestly, I started [trail running] when I was angry and it seemed like a socially acceptable way to push myself and punish myself. When my lungs burned from pushing myself up a mountain it distracted me from my own heavy and sad feelings. You can only run so far on rage though, and over time it allowed me to work through a lot of my issues. I can get a lot further on joy now” (FP85).**

### Theme 2: Gender Influences on Resilience

Eighty-three per cent (n = 122) of participants considered themselves to be ‘absolutely’ or ‘often’ resilient on a five-point scale. With regards to change management, participants’ discussed change as a constant and necessary part of life, as opportunity, and as a contributor to their resilience, as well as the importance of positively coping with change.

- ◆ **“Life is constantly changing, adapting and evolving. Within that inevitable change I believe we have the opportunity to shape our future” (MP10).**
- ◆ **“The world, by its very nature, is an evolving, spinning thing of beauty. Change in our daily lives is as natural as the changing of seasons” (FP113).**

Table 2: Positive Contributions to Resilience, by Gender



Women were more likely than men to rely on their positivity, social network, self-care and optimism as strategies to support their resilience (Table 2).

Gender-based differences appeared within the themes that arose in participants’ personal self-talk. Women exposed two subthemes not found amongst the men: self confidence and exploration/adventure.

*Self-confidence: courage, bravery, proactivity*

- ◆ **“Dare to take up space” (FP102).**
- ◆ **[Through trail running, I gained] “empowerment in myself that I can traverse tough terrain on my own, and confidence to accomplish other physically demanding things, like bagging summits and 12-hour hospital shifts” (FP108).**

*Exploration & Adventure: nature, curiosity and creativity*

- ◆ **“In the end, she became more than she expected. She became the journey, and like all journeys, she did not end, she just simply changed directions and kept going” (FP114).**

The third major gender difference appeared in participants’ other outdoor leisure pursuits. Hiking, walking, cycling, water-based leisure, snow sports and camping were mentioned a total of 461 times in open-ended responses. However, women were the only participants to mention mindfulness-based activities such as yoga, lounging, reading, meditating, gardening and travel.

## Discussion

Pohl et al. (2000) argue “social, political, economic, sexual and religious discrimination filters into all realms of women’s lives – personally, interpersonally and systemically” (p. 416). Despite their study having occurred almost two decades ago, discrimination against women is still pervasive in modern society (Schnall, 2017). The relationship between women and the wilderness is deeply complex.

“It may be that the personal is political, and many of the outcomes effecting women women on the personal and interpersonal levels could affect them on a systemic level as well. Wilderness offered women the opportunities to challenge norms, try new things, and find a new world-view. These outcomes may not only shape the individual but also the very system in which she lives and interacts” (Pohl et al., 2000, p. 429).

The present study revealed that spending time in the wilderness worked to shape the individual identities of the women. Perhaps this effect will concurrently work to erode the systematic misrepresentation of women in the wilderness (McNeil et al., 2012), and challenge the ongoing socio-political attempts to diminish the power of women in modern society (Schnall, 2017).

## Conclusion

The differences in the ways men and women build resilience through trail running are important. More often than men, women drew from their optimism, positivity and self-care to support their resilience. Women also exposed themes of self-confidence, bravery and tenacity within their personal self-talk that were not evident in the responses from men. Despite being historically socialized away from nature and wilderness experiences, women in the present study showed that they are not only akin to nature, but able to draw upon their nature experiences to support their resilience. The power, energy and engagement women gained through trail running has the potential to work its’ way into their families and the communities with which they interact. In short, “women are rising” (Schnall, 2017, para. 4).

## Recommendations

- ✓ Facilitate resilience-supporting outdoor programs
- ✓ Provide resilience training with regards to gender differences and to specific diagnoses
- ✓ Conduct further research with a clear focus on participants’ understanding of the interaction between their gender and their resilience
- ✓ Future research amongst the trail running and/or outdoor adventure community with an equal gender distribution
- ✓ Future research that takes into account LGBTQ+ gender identities

## References

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