

WEEK 6 ANSWER TO QUESTION 1
STEP 6.8 ASK MARK

Hello. Welcome to the last, that is to say the sixth of these Ask Mark sessions. We are approaching the absolute finishing line.

As usual, I have four questions selected by the mentors, and this is the first question: “I would like to know what Dr. Solms would say about resilience. I worked with families for many years, and often one or two family members would be resilient to mental instability in highly dysfunctional households, whilst most other family members would not. Position in the family or having power did not seem to be a factor. So what does he think the resilience stems from?”

The answer to this question is, I'm afraid, what you expect it would be, which is that in the mind – as in everything else – there are genetic differences. The major explanation in this situation, such as is being asked about here, must be constitutional genetic differences. So that's a very simple answer to what nevertheless is actually a quite complicated question, because there isn't one genetic factor called resilience.

You can have resilience in a variety of different ways, in a great variety of different ways. To mention the obvious, there are multiple innate emotion systems, affective systems. We focused in this course – to the extent that we focused on them at all – on the six basic emotions, but there are many other inbuilt affects, which are called sensory affects or homeostatic affects. If you add them all together, there really are many hardwired affective systems in the human brain.

Any one of those can vary genetically, or any permutation can vary on a genetic basis. So whereas one person might be resilient in regard to fear anxiety, another might be resilient in regard to, say, rage.

And a very different pattern then would come in the sense that somebody who's resilient to fear anxiety who's confronted by the sort of frustrations which bring forth rage will suffer normal rage, because that's not where their resilience lies. And you can extrapolate from there, you get the point.

It's not the only reason why it's more complex than it seems, but the other main reason is that those genetic factors interact with environmental factors in complex ways, and the environment doesn't begin at birth. There is an intrauterine environment, and there's lots of good evidence. For example, maternal stress, we know affects certain affective systems in the brain, so a child may be born apparently sensitised to, for example, fear anxiety on a constitutional basis. But in fact they're sensitised because of something that happened to the mum during, for example, the second trimester of pregnancy, which is a period that we know affects those systems.

So what looks genetic might in fact be a combination of genetic and environmental factors that precede birth. And then we also have to take account of critical periods and maturational milestones, by which I'm referring most specifically to the fact that early environmental influences have a far greater effect than later environmental influences. That's not to say that the later things don't have any effect, but you have to have much bigger environmental influences later for them to override constitutional differences.

Small environmental variation in the early maturational environment can have quite a big effect. So things that happen very early which are not remembered – which are not noticed – might then be considered to be constitutional variability, whereas in fact, it's not. It just looks like it later on.

So that's a bit of a messy question to a simple-- I mean a bit of a messy answer to a simple question. But those are covering the main and, I think, the obvious bases.



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