EMBODIED RESILIENCE

The Dark and Light Side of Resilience

Embodiment for life: learning to sense, adapt and return to centre.

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We live in a culture that often celebrates resilience as endurance. Be strong. Keep going. Bounce back. Push through.

There is value in our capacity to endure difficult things. But resilience has a darker side when strength becomes overriding what the body is telling us. We can become very good at functioning while holding our breath, gripping our muscles, ignoring fatigue and suppressing emotion.

From the outside, this may look like resilience. From the inside, it can begin to feel more like survival.

> *Healthy resilience is not about how much we can endure before we break. It is our capacity to sense, respond, adapt, express, recover and return to centre.*

Awareness: where resilience begins

Before I can change how I respond, I first have to notice. What am I sensing? Where am I holding? Do I need more support or more space, more energy or less?

In somatic education, awareness is where choice begins. Science uses the term interoception for our sensing and interpretation of signals from within the body. In Nia, the first principle of the Art of Sensation training brings us back to the felt sense.

Before appearance, before performance, before "doing it right": What do I feel? Awareness gives us information. Information creates the possibility of choice. Choice creates adaptability.

Resilience requires range

The body is rhythmic by design. Breath moves in and out. Muscles contract and release. Joints stabilise and mobilise. We activate and recover. Nature moves this way too: day and night, tides and seasons, growth and rest.

Problems can arise when we become stuck at one end of the pendulum: activation without settling, stability becoming rigidity, strength without softness, giving without receiving.

> *Healthy resilience is the capacity to dance with the pendulum of life rather than trying to freeze ourselves permanently in the middle.*

Returning to centre

Centre is not somewhere we remain perfectly still. It is a reference point we can move from and return to.

In Nia we draw from the martial arts and connect to the hara, the centre around the pelvis and lower abdomen. Rather than holding ourselves rigidly “in balance”, we learn to move our centre through space.

Every step is a weight shift. We leave one place, transfer, reorganise and arrive somewhere new. The goal is not to never lose balance. The skill is knowing how to respond when balance changes.

The smile-lines: small shifts, whole-body information

In Nia, the image of a smile-line offers a simple way to reorganise movement without forcing it. Through the foot, we can sense the heel arriving, weight rolling forward, toes spreading and the ground supporting us.

Through the pelvis, we explore mobility and weight shift rather than collapsing or “dropping” our weight. In the face, we might soften the jaw, release the brow and allow a smile to appear.

These are not cures or guaranteed changes in mood. They are invitations to notice how a small physical adjustment can change our experience and offer another choice.

Squeeze and release. Stability and mobility.

Muscles need tension for support and power, but they also need the capacity to release. Can I engage without hardening? Can I recognise when effort is no longer necessary?

We need both stability and mobility. Too little stability can feel unsupported; too much can become rigidity. Resilient movement is a continual negotiation between the two.

Form and freedom: learning to adapt

Nia combines structured choreography with opportunities for personal expression. Learning unfamiliar patterns asks the brain and body to pay attention, remember, coordinate and problem-solve.

Yet the aim is not to reproduce choreography mechanically. Form gives us a map. Sensation helps us navigate it. Choice allows us to adapt.

On any given day I may need more stability or mobility, more expression or containment, more power or softness. The practice is to remain connected to myself while exploring something new.

The 52 Moves and the body’s design

Nia’s 52 Moves provide a vocabulary for the whole body: feet, legs, pelvis, spine, chest, arms, hands and head. We change direction, level, speed and range; shift weight, stabilise, mobilise and coordinate.

Practising barefoot can deepen our awareness of the sensory relationship between feet and ground. The intention is to work with the body’s design, rather than treating the body as a machine of isolated parts.

Music, rhythm and emotional resilience

Music brings different rhythms, tempos, cultures, textures and moods. We listen, predict, coordinate, adjust and respond. Each change becomes another opportunity to practise adaptability.

Emotional resilience does not mean remaining positive or unaffected. It includes our capacity to feel, express, move through intensity and eventually return. Music and movement can provide a doorway into expression when words are difficult.

Embodied movement does not replace psychological or medical care. It can, however, invite a different question: not only “Why do I feel this?” but also “Where do I feel this, and what might my body need now?”

The felt sense and Universal Joy

Nia’s first Art of Sensation principle invites us to connect to Joy through sensation. Universal Joy is not simply the emotion of happiness. It points to the aliveness present in organic life.

The pressure of a foot against the floor. Warmth in the hands. The movement of the ribs. The sensation of breath. We can sense that we are alive without forcing ourselves to feel happy.

The light side of resilience

Life will move us away from centre. There will be stress, loss, challenge, excitement and change. Resilience is not remaining untouched by any of it.

It is becoming more responsive, more adaptable and more capable of experiencing different states without becoming permanently trapped in one. With practice we learn to sense, move, feel, express, shift, adapt, recover and return to centre.

> *Perhaps resilience means knowing the sensation of centre well enough to recognise when we have moved away, and knowing we can find our way home again.*

This is not about teaching the body to become something it is not. It is about remembering the intelligence, rhythmicity, adaptability and aliveness that were there all along.

Adapted for easier reading from Mia Steyn’s article “The Dark and Light Side of Resilience: Embodiment for Life” on niawithmia.com. This is an edited, condensed edition.

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