

RESILIENCE: FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING - WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SPINE RACE FINISHERS?

Resilience: the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness – Oxford English Dictionary
Spine definition: the ability to recover quickly from setbacks and become stronger from experience



Called **"Britain's Most Brutal Race"**, the Spine Race is a 268 mile non-stop ultra-endurance marathon up the full length of the UK's Pennine Way, carrying everything you need to survive, in early January. There are check-points (CPs) and enforced cut-off times, but it's not a 'staged' race (which would be easier). Many start, but few finish. No one has died, yet, but Mountain Rescue is invariably called out every year and some competitors are hospitalised.

Background & Methodologies. Using critical event analysis, personality theory, case studies, informal and semi-structured interviews, observations, archival reviews, descriptive analysis and psycholinguistics, this longitudinal, ideographic, qualitative research synthesises six years' experience (2012-2018) from competitors, volunteers, professional crew and the Race Psychologist, Dr Fiona Beddoes-Jones, to explore what we can learn from Spine Race finishers re. resilience, success and thriving, and how these lessons can be applied personally and professionally by everyone.

The three kinds of person who enter and finish.

1. Competitive, driven, focused, independent. They want to win, to conquer the elements and other people. They 'race'
2. Laid back, relaxed, self-sufficient, stable, they like their own company, they enjoy all weathers and night running. They enjoy the whole event
3. Sociable, will buddy up or walk in a team, they join or form other groups easily. They have more highs and lows than the other two types

Resilience 1 – Pavel Paloncy has completed the Spine Race five times, winning it a record three times! A professional athlete, he always becomes a front runner to go as far as he can without stopping or sleeping, then sleeps in a proper bed at a check-point before setting off again. Affectionately called 'The Machine'.

Resilience 2 – Hallucinating is very common when physically exhausted. One competitor thought the big brown cow he saw wasn't real.... so he ran straight through it, surprising the cow and almost knocking himself out!

Resilience 3 – The tortoise vs the hare. It's possible to stride the whole way to Scotland in seven days without running. However, this reduces contingencies as it takes more time. Needing to average 46+ miles a day, sometimes the terrain and weather are so difficult, the average distance covered can be one mile/hour!

Resilience 4 – Tom Jones timed out in 2015 due to helping other competitors he found in difficulty on the course. They couldn't navigate, were exhausted, hadn't eaten properly and didn't have the appropriate variety of kit to cope with the conditions. To ensure their safety, Tom stayed with them, lent them his kit and guided them to safety. He then joined the Safety Team, working as a volunteer for the rest of the week.

Resilience 5 – Eoin Keith, 2016 winner, deliberately became 'fat adapted' over the previous year to carry fewer supplies and travel more quickly on less food.

Resilience 6 – Fewer female competitors enter and finish compared to the men. They are often smaller and lighter than the men. They adapt by being very flexible, carrying neater kit, being better prepared and being good at personal management so they have fewer issues with feet and hypothermia.

Resilience 7 – Cognitive Fitness. Mental and emotional flexibility; thinking in the right ways at the right time for effective performance and recovery.

Resilience 8 – FOMO! 'Fear of missing out' affects many volunteers at the start of the week's competition. They stay awake too long and become exhausted, becoming snappy and difficult to work with. Resilient volunteers practise good self-management, eat well and have enough sleep.

Resilience 9 – The most 'successful' competitors (who enjoy the race the most, even if they DNF) always retain their sense of humour, even if it becomes 'dark' humour when they are exhausted. They create energy around themselves rather than sapping it from others.

Post-race recovery. Those who recover most quickly and fully, mentally and physically:

- Reflect on every aspect of their race in detail
- Use online forums and Facebook to learn what others did
- Write, publish and share their own race story and key learnings
- Enter again asap or sign up to volunteer so they have a new focus

Poor post-race recovery strategies include:

- Making non-completion an identity issue and feeling 'like a failure' (as a person, parent etc.) Without help, this can be very difficult to overcome
- Continuing to train and compete rather than resting properly
- 'Disassociation' – refusal to engage with feelings and emotions – often associated with a DNF
- 'Learning Blindness' – refusal to engage with self-reflection and explore personal learnings and learnings from others.

Top six reasons competitors DNF (Did Not Finish) the race:

1. Lack of mental, practical or physical preparation
2. They under-estimate the terrain or the weather (arrogance?)
3. Poor self-management; failure to eat, drink, sleep, keep warm/dry/clean
4. Not 'cognitively fit' – lack flexibility or make a mistake they can't recover from
5. Some kind of physical accident on the course
6. They give up for whatever reason (and often self-justify as an ego-defence)

Success strategies from finishers (which we can apply to our own lives):

- Have a daily treat to look forward to
- Reward yourself for success but don't punish yourself for non-success
- Non-success is a learning opportunity not a failure
- Practise with your eyes closed (so darkness becomes your friend)
- Mentally visualise everything!
- Over-prepare everything!
- Practise your micro-navigation: night nav. in the dark is very different from day nav.
- Continually check progress and re-orient if necessary
- Have a realistic mental attitude (especially towards a DNF result)
- Consider every possible eventuality and have contingencies in place
- Love life, love the weather and love all terrains
- Find joy in small things
- Practise your strategies e.g. sleeping and waking
- Develop and use useful positive mental mantras e.g. 'tread carefully
- Know yourself! e.g. is contact from home beneficial or not? Will it support you and push you forwards or make you want to give up and get back home?
- Self-reflection can really help heal the past and prepare for the future
- You can't rely on technology! e.g. no GPS or phone signal in some areas – so always make sure you're self-sufficient and don't 'need' anyone else
- Remain flexible. Don't become wedded to any one plan or person
- Have a spare or an alternative for everything (kit, route and approach)!
- Always have more than one contingency and a back-up plan!

What is Cognitive Fitness?

Flexibility

- ↓
- Different Strategies**
- Practical / Theoretical
 - Positive / Negative
 - Collaborative / Competitive
 - Strategic / Detail
 - Creative / Logical
 - Different Time-frames
 - 'Through other people's eyes'

Agility

- ↓
- Speed of Response**
- Planning
 - Problem Solving
 - Contingencies
 - Self-Awareness
 - Self-Regulation
 - Alternative Scenarios
 - State Management

Strength

- ↓
- Courage**
- Mental Toughness
 - Resilience
 - Vulnerability
 - Attitude
 - Generosity of Spirit
 - Acceptance
 - Forgiveness

Key learnings from Spine Race finishers. The importance of:

1. Personal hygiene and self-management; physical and mental
2. Reflection: learning all we can from our own and others' experiences
3. Realistic expectations: of the weather, our performance and emotions
4. More practice = more resilience (in that particular environment)
5. Preparation, contingencies and remaining adaptable in the moment
6. Developing and using strategies you know work for you
7. Interdependence: not relying on others but working with them
8. It's not necessarily the people with the best kit who finish, but those who get the best out of whatever resources and kit they have
9. Complete honesty with ourselves and others, pre, during and post-race.
10. Cognitive Fitness: thinking in the right ways at the right time and being mentally flexible and agile with courage.

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Dr Fiona Beddoes-Jones is the Founder of The Cognitive Fitness Consultancy and the Author of the following psychometrics: Thinking Styles™, Cognitive Team Roles™, Leadership Temperament Types™ and the Authentic Leadership 360™

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More information can be found at:

<https://thespinerace.com/>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAMQ_b1rnoc
<https://www.facebook.com/pg/TheSpineRace/videos/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-running-blog/2013/nov/22/montane-spine-race-268-miles-running-pain>

Many blogs and individual competitor accounts can be found via Google and Facebook. This poster is available as a PDF from www.cognitivefitness.co.uk