



Resilience — The Ability To Rebound

What Is Resilience?

What characteristic or trait allows one individual to rebound from life's negative experiences — small or large — while another individual is devastated, stopped dead in his or her tracks, under the same or similar circumstances?

This tendency for a person to cope with stress and adversity — “bouncing back” to a previous state of normal functioning — has been labelled as resilience.

How Is Resilience Acquired?

Several factors are found to modify the negative effects of adverse life situations. Many studies show that the primary factor is to have relationships that

- provide care and support;
- create love and trust; and
- offer encouragement, both within and outside the family.

Additional factors are also associated with resilience, like

- the capacity to make realistic plans,
- having self-confidence and a positive self-image,
- developing communications skills, and
- having the capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses.

Another protective factor is related to moderating the negative effects of environmental hazards or a stressful situation in order to direct vulnerable people to optimistic paths, such as external social support. More specifically, Werner (1995) distinguished three contexts for protective factors:

- personal attributes, including outgoing, bright, and positive self-concepts;
- the family, such as having close bonds with at least one family member or an emotionally stable parent; and
- the community, including receiving support or counsel.

Furthermore, a study of the elderly in Zurich, Switzerland, illuminated the role humour plays as a coping mechanism to maintain a state of happiness in the face of age-related adversity.

Resilience Skills Can Be Learned

As individual, couple, and family therapists, we are frequently consulted at a time when people are feeling the challenges of coping, whether at a time of personal or familial crisis, loss, transition, or social catastrophe.

Children also need to learn resilience, and parents can help them to gain confidence and restore balance in the wake of life-altering circumstances.

Our work as therapists frequently calls us to help family members grow and support one another in difficult times, drawing on their past experiences of resilience and learning new skills to move forward.

Some of the ways we do this is by encouraging our clients to develop realistic goals and move towards them; to keep a long-term perspective and consider the stressful event in a broader context; to avoid seeing crises or stressful events as unbearable problems; and to maintain a hopeful outlook so as to expect good things and to be able to visualize and move toward what is wished through positive action.

A number of self-help approaches to resilience building have been developed, drawing mainly on the theory and practice of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Psychiatrists Steven Southwick and Dennis Charney, authors of a new book *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*, propose that individuals can take specific actions to be more resilient. One of their fascinating findings is that giving support to people in stressful situations can alleviate our own stress better than simply receiving support.

Southwick says, "The optimism that realistic people tend to express is called realistic optimism, not a Pollyanna, rose-coloured optimism. The realistic optimist sees as much of the negative as the pessimist does, but knows how to disengage and not dwell on it."

He suggests ten ways one can start to safeguard against severe stress and build resilience:

1. Maintain an optimistic but realistic outlook.
2. Confront your fears.
3. Rely on your inner moral compass.
4. Draw on faith, religion, and spirituality.
5. Give and accept social support.
6. Identify and imitate sturdy role models.
7. Commit to good health and physical fitness.
8. Challenge and develop your mind to stay sharp.
9. Learn to solve problems and be flexible in a crisis.
10. Find meaning in your life and opportunities for growth.

by Orville Green, M.Div.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

by Reinhold Niebuhr

For Further Reading:

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