

RESILIENT KIDS...AND ADULTS

Coping and Using Life Challenges Creatively

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Three-year old Colin rushed in the house ahead of his mom, turned, and said in an exhausted voice, "I'm going to lie down; preschool is just too hard on me."

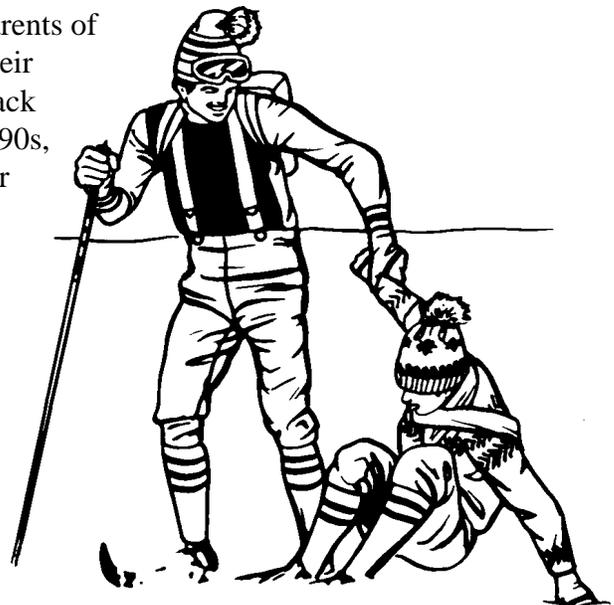
Life is hard. Not in the ways it used to be: waking before dawn for a day of plowing, feeding cattle, or fence-mending; hoping the feed and supplies would make it through winter; and doctoring children without antibiotics. Today's challenges are different: keeping pace with computers, competing in global markets, and getting along with a wide variety of people. Symptoms of the hard life are evident in stress-related conditions: weight problems, increased colds, irritability, and depression. Increased rates of suicide, child abuse, heart attacks, and cancer have all been tied to our high-stress society.

Life is great. Many of the children, parents, and grandparents of the frontier created hope and happiness in the midst of their challenges. Their legacy is one of resilience: bouncing back when life lets them down. Amid the challenges of the 1990s, their great-grandchildren are finding new paths to a better quality of life. Under the best circumstances, families, schools, workplaces, and community groups can build strengths of self-esteem, fair play, and compassion. But recent research shows that even children in dysfunctional families and hostile communities often show a remarkable capacity to survive and thrive in the midst of trouble. Their life lessons teach us how to press on and how to bounce back. Their stories also remind us to reach out and be a source of resilience in our communities.

"It's not how far you fall, but how high you bounce."

--Jackson Brown, Sr. in

Life's Little Instruction Book 1991.



RESILIENCY: TRAITS THAT BUILD STRENGTHS

Family scholars have found that most children of troubled families do not become alcoholics and abusers, as popular opinion and previous research predicted. Transcending their stress, they adapt by building talents, relationships, and insight on their situation.

Survivors' self-protection and growth strategies vary by personality type, developmental stage, and social environment. Wolin and Wolin (1993) found that children who avoid or transcend damaging homes display one or more of the following strengths:

“True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, conflicting information.”

--Winston Churchill

One caring adult can make a difference in a child's resiliency and often it is someone sought out by the child.

Insight is the habit of asking questions and giving honest answers, even in a chaotic environment. Insightful young children use intuitive *sensing* and defensive responding (watching carefully, avoiding, complying to avoid conflict). Adolescents' intuitively *know* or grasp the family's problems and their effects. An adults' *understanding* of the past leads to pride in survival and perspective on vulnerabilities.

Independence means balancing privacy and control with family loyalty. Manipulated or controlled children cope by *straying away* from painful events. Teens *disengage* from hurtful parents and seek esteem-building events elsewhere. Adults try *separating* physically and emotionally from irrational parents and challenge themselves to achieve.

Resilient children build intimate **relationships** and meaningful ties with a caring network outside the troubled family. Rejected children *seek connections* with open, approving adults. Adolescents often actively *recruit* a respected adult as parent substitute or mentor. Adults build on these skills by consciously *attaching* to others (vs. withdrawing as from a hostile or neglectful parent).

Initiative begins with self-confidence and determination to master even a confused or conflicted family environment. Young children in troubled families take charge by *exploring ways* to meet practical needs (keeping warm, getting fed, having clean clothes) and *manage* changing parent moods. By working toward competency in school, work, and hobbies, teens *develop purpose* and problem-solving skills. Adults continue the pattern by *generating solutions* to career, home, and community needs, learning from mistakes, and helping others.



Contributions of **Humor** and **Creativity** are summarized by psychologist Steven Wolin: “To deal honestly when you were deceived, to have empathy when you were often hurt, to speak straight when you heard mostly double talk, to risk intimacy when you were rejected, to separate when you were needy, to produce when nothing you ever did was good enough, to live well when you’ve been brought up badly require imagination.” **Playing** (pretending, joking) is an outlet for overstressed children. Teens refine play by **shaping** it into poetry, dance, and visual arts for self-acceptance and expression. Later, adults **composing** through art and ideas “make nothing into something” and, **laughing** at themselves and the world, “make something into nothing.”

“Creative minds have always been known to survive any kind of bad training.”

--Anna Freud

Morality is the exercise of an informed conscience that practices justice and kindness, knowing the pain of their opposites. Morality begins in young children’s **judging** right and wrong, based on experience. Adolescents add the thought and practice of **valuing** honesty, fairness, and compassion. Adults continue the transformation of neglect or cruelty by **servicing** privately and publicly.

“It is a blessed thing that in every age someone has had the individuality and courage to stand by his own convictions.”

-- Robert Ingersoll

TAKING STOCK: Measuring Your Own Resilience

INSIGHT

- I can sense when something in a relationship is going bad.
- My friends don't seek my advice on relationship problems.

INDEPENDENCE

- I enjoy being my own person.
- People are always pulling me into their conflicts.

RELATIONSHIP

- Listening and making friends are my strong suit.
- I often have no one to talk to about my problems.

INITIATIVE

- I am always coming up with and trying out new ideas.
- When there’s a problem I usually wait for others to act.

CREATIVITY

- My talents for art, crafts, music, or drama help me de-stress.
- I get run down and burned out with nothing to refresh me.

HUMOR

- I often see the funny side of things and can laugh at myself
- When you’re feeling down, it’s no time to joke.

MORALITY

- It’s better to do what’s right, even if there is a risk.
- I feel good when I tell someone off or get revenge.

Check each item that describes you. Add checks for first items under each trait. If four or more, you probably bounce back from stress pretty well. Sum up checks for each second item under each trait. If three or more, your resilience is probably low. For better health and optimism, set a plan to strengthen coping skills.

RESILIENCY IN THE FACE OF TRAUMATIC STRESSORS

Resiliency is nowhere more evident than in children's and adults' coping with overwhelming stressors. The following are real-life scenarios in which names are changed to maintain anonymity.

Resiliency is the power of the human spirit to embrace challenge, guided by wisdom and experience.

Juanita was an immigrant farm worker left to care for five children after the accidental death of her husband. Seeking help through a local day care center, she acquired housing--which she cleaned and deloused. With only \$50, she bought flour, lard, beans, and a few vegetables and fed her children for two weeks. Meanwhile she obtained work at a local meat-packing plant, became friends with her new neighbors, and enrolled her oldest children in a summer recreation program. After she became self-sufficient, she gradually learned English, supported her children's success in school, and saved to go on to vocational school.

Mike's parents were not ready to be parents, and it showed in his mother's bitterness and his father's beatings. Turning to teachers and youth leaders, he found encouragement and achievement through school, sports, and clubs. As an adult, his wounds led to a divorce and bouts of depression. But an emerging self-awareness and interpersonal skills produced a strong second marriage, nurturing skills with his children, and effectiveness as a healing counselor to others.

Alice was a 45-year-old wife and mother devastated when her husband broke a 20-year marriage with an affair and divorce. Ordinarily cheerful and optimistic, she became anxious and depressed, unable to enjoy her job, family, or friends. Reduced income and home repairs created financial crisis. Old friends avoided her. Personal counseling helped Alice put her future in perspective; maintaining friendships with neighbors and coworkers provided vital support; helping her aging mother led her to transcend her troubles and gain confidence in her ability to make a difference. Learning from healing experiences, she became an empathic listener and as a fearless risk-taker, unafraid of failure, could be counted on to find a creative solution and pursue it with a passion.

RESILIENCY IN THE FACE OF DAILY AND CHRONIC STRESSORS

Daily hassles and chronic stress can gradually depress attitudes and deplete resources little-by-little. Likewise, developmental changes require continuous adjustment and revitalizing, as shown below.

Angelica, a hostess in a fast-food restaurant, found herself in the face of an irate customer one night when she packed the wrong order a second time. "I'm sorry," she said with weak resignation, "I've been up since 3 AM and this is my third job today. I must be too tired to listen." She kept calm, rechecked the order, and replaced the regular soft drink with a diet. As she handed the bag back, she smiled and said, "Sorry for the trouble; I hope you enjoy your meal." Angelica was doing all she could to be self-reliant, cooperative, and relaxed under difficult circumstances.

"There's nothing to do in this town," 10-year-old Tony complained for a month after his family moved from the big city to a small rural community. Instead of giving up, Tony tried out the local pastimes: Scouts, sports, volunteer activities with a church group. His agreeable personality and sense of humor helped him win friends. Gradually, his parents came to know most of their best friends through Tony's activities.

Marty directed a human service agency that struggled financially with budget cuts and reduced insurance payments. He considered a different job, and in studying his options realized two things: First, that he really liked his counseling work; Second, that he recognized that many of his skills and materials were needed in a variety of locations: workplaces, community groups, schools, churches, etc. He began developing training programs for professionals and families. These programs supported his counseling practice and eventually led to a new career as a consultant and speaker.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Resiliency is important to children, youth, and adults because it is the extra measure of attitude, knowledge, and skill that helps them cope and grow.

- Children who can build relationships open a new world of learning and laughing with peers, parents, and teachers.
- A teen who realizes parent or peer drug/alcohol abuse means trouble can seek safety (and help for others).
- Adults who cultivate creativity and initiative will be more productive or more quickly recover from unemployment or business failure.



Most of us have more inner resources than we think.

WHAT YOU CAN DO?

Recall Your Own Resiliency

Take inventory of your personal struggles, family history, and present challenges. Surviving or succeeding probably required one or more resiliency traits. Think about overcoming fears, achieving dreams, resolving conflicts, or just hanging in there with a difficult person or situation. Make notes on how these experiences made you a better person, proud, and able to handle even greater challenges.

Reinforce Your Resiliency

Find time each day to grow more resilient with these techniques:

RETREAT: Back off from conflict situations by walking away, pausing to reflect, or imagining funny or serious solutions.

REFRAME: Attitude-adjust by viewing crises as creative choices. Approach others with a softer voice and an open mind, suggesting new ideas or solutions, and remembering successes, celebrating small victories, remembering reasons for hope.

RELATE: Balance stress and conflict with fun and fellowship, and time with persons who love you and believe in you.

REACH OUT: Get in touch with others by listening to feelings, sharing kindnesses, and encouraging resilience over a cup of coffee, around a ball field, or while planting a tree.

The art of bouncing back is not born, but learned.

A community's support can make the difference between kids coping and "cracking."

Recommend Resiliency in Your Community

Spread the word to your community. Support groups such as 4-H, scouts, athletics, churches, and civic clubs that build coping skills. Encourage citizen forums to discuss needs and strategies for creating self-confident, capable children and adults.

RESILIENCY: RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE

Popular Books

Margaret, Brodtkin. (1993). *Every Kid Counts: 31 Ways to Save Our Children*. San Francisco. Harper San Francisco.

Joy Dryfoos. (1990). *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Richard Louv. (1991). *Childhood's Future*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Sharon Scott. (1989). *Peer Pressure Reversal*. Amherst, MA: Human Resources Development Press.

Steven J. Wolin & Sybil Wolin. (1993). *The Resilient Self*. New York: Villiard Books

Research Studies

Dale A. Blyth & Eugene C. Roehlkepartak. (1993). *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth*. Minneapolis: the Search Institute.

Timothy Dugan & Robert Coles. (Eds., 1989). *The Child in Our Times: Studies in the Development of Resiliency*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

James E. Anthony & Bertram Cohler. (Eds., 1987). *The Invulnerable Child*. New York: John Wiley.

Martin Seligman. (1992). *Learned Optimism: The Skill to Conquer Life's Obstacles, Large and Small*. New York: Random House.

Emily E. Werner & Ruth S. Smith. (1982). *Vulnerable But Not Invincible*. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill.

Teaching Materials

Steven Glenn. (1989). *Developing Capable People*. Provo, UT: Sunrise, Inc.

Gene Rohrbeck & Brenda Seevers. (1988). *Dream and Realities: A Handbook on Life Decisions*. Laramie, WY: UW Cooperative Extension Service.

Charles A. Smith. (1990). *From Wonder to Wisdom: Using Stories*

to Help Children Grow. New York: Penguin.

Other Resources

The Cooperative State Research Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), USDA, initiated a national network on family resiliency in 1993. Supported by over 35 institutions, the network has facilitated conferences, electronic mail dialogue and information resources, and resource/research projects on parenting, adolescent sexuality, and youth violence prevention. For further information contact nfrs@extend.mes.umn.edu, or write your state family life specialist at University of Wyoming, P.O. Box 3354, Laramie, WY 82071-3354.

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