

Understanding and Promoting Resiliency in Youth

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During the last 25 years youth researchers and practitioners have increasingly reduced their focus on youth's risk behaviors and have increased their efforts to understand youth resilience and develop programs that promote the positive development of youth (Perkins & Caldwell, 2005).

There are several broad definitions of resilience. Masten (as cited by Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney & Villaruel, 2003) defines it as "the ability of individuals to withstand the stressors of life and the challenges to their healthy development". The American Psychological Association defines it as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences".

According to Lee, Cheung, and Kwong (2012), resilience is a multidimensional concept that requires a narrower definition. They define resilience as a capacity, a process, and a result. As a *capacity*, resilience is youth's ability to adapt to changes and stressful events in a healthy way. As a *process*, resilience refers to a youth's return to normal functioning after encountering a severe stressor, and as a *result*, resilience is the positive and beneficial outcomes resulting from successfully navigating stressful events.

To understand youth resiliency, youth development professionals must take a holistic look at all aspects of a youth's life, including the severity of the situation they are experiencing,

the personal traits that help them cope with the challenges and stress, and the environmental supports they have (e.g. at home, school). The balance between these elements will either undermine or promote resiliency in the youth.

It is also important to understand that time is an essential element in resiliency.

Resiliency develops over time, based on the cumulative effect of difficult events and situations. Time is also important because other challenges or supports may reduce or increase the severity of those difficult events and situations over time (Perkins & Caldwell, 2005).

There are other important facts, as described by Perkins & Caldwell (2005), that youth development professionals must understand about resiliency, such as:

- 1) Not all stress or adverse situations are of the same magnitude, and some youth may be at greater risk than others.
- 2) Resiliency is multidimensional in nature. Thus, a youth may be resilient in one domain (e.g. school), but not in another (e.g. work).
- 3) Resiliency is not a personality trait. Although some personality traits have been found to promote resiliency (e.g. humor, flexibility), resiliency is highly linked to the youth's environment.
- 4) The ability of a young person to cope with stress varies over time according to the youth's circumstances.
- 5) Although most youth are resilient in the face of adversity, resilience is not guaranteed.

Some youth are not resilient and do not recover from adversity.

It is also important for youth development professionals to understand that resilient youth are not necessarily high achievers who have some kind of extraordinary ability (Jensen, 2010).

Research has shown that the main difference between youth who do well despite risks, and those

who do not, is the presence of internal and external protective factors (Lee, Cheung & Kwong, 2012).

Internal protective factors are characteristics or personality traits of a youth. Some internal protective factors that have been identified in resilient youth are optimism, self-efficacy, a strong religious faith, intelligence, and a clear and positive identity. These protective factors are not exhaustive. A growing body of literature supports the notion that resilience can also be enhanced by strong ethnic and cultural values. Research findings also suggest that a sense of humor, combining cognitive competence with an optimistic outlook, is an internal protective factor that alleviates an individual's focus on personal failure. Humor is also therapeutic for managing anxiety and creates a buffer for the individual against the negative effects of stress. A good sense of humor is also positively related to a healthy self-concept (Lee et al., 2012).

External protective factors can be found in home, school, and community environments. Researchers have identified three key external protective factors that apply to each of these environments: (1) caring relationships; (2) positive and high expectations; and (3) opportunities for meaningful participation. These protective factors enhance youth's positive development, regardless of their risk level. Even if a youth is facing little adversity, these protective factors enable him or her to thrive or do even better. The more contexts that provide these protective processes, the more likely a youth is to succeed (Lee et al., 2012).

Resilience is a major contributor to positive youth development. According to Lee et al. (2012), the strategies used by youth to cope with adversity lead to competence, confidence, connectedness, character, and caring, all of which are indicators of positive youth development. Furthermore, most resilient youth are able to overcome their initial traumatic life experiences (e.g. growing up in families with a mentally ill member, being abused, or having criminally

involved parents). Thus, cultivating resilience is an important way to promote the healthy psychological and social development of youth.

Youth programs, and youth development professionals, can promote resiliency in youth by promoting the development of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity. According to Grotberg (1999) these are the five basic building blocks of resilience. These five building blocks contribute to a youth's ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, or even be transformed by experiences of adversity. As seen below, Grotberg developed a paradigm of resilience based on these building blocks that forms the basis for dealing with life's adversities.

### **Paradigm of Resilience**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Building Blocks</b>
I HAVE	Supports around each individual to promote resilience	Trust
I AM	Encouragement in developing the inner strengths of confidence, self-esteem, and responsibility	Autonomy Identity
I CAN	Acquisition of interpersonal and problem solving skills	Initiative Industry

Each of the I HAVE, I AM, and I CAN factors described below suggests numerous actions youth programs and youth development professionals can implement to promote resilience in youth. These actions can be implemented directly with youth, or with parents and families to enhance their capacity to promote resilience in their youth.

The **I HAVE** factors are the external supports and resources that promote resilience. A youth needs external supports and resources to develop the feelings of safety and security that lay the foundation for developing resilience. A resilient youth must have:

- **Trusting relationships:** Youth need parents and primary caregivers who love them and accept them unconditionally. They also need love and emotional support from other adults, such as family members, teachers, and friends.
- **Structure and rules at home:** Youth need parents who provide clear rules and routines, expect the youth to follow them, and can rely on the youth to do so. Youth also need limits and consequences for behavior.
- **Role models:** Youth also need parents and other adults to show them acceptable behaviors, both within the family and toward outsiders.
- **Encouragement to be autonomous:** Adults, especially parents, who encourage the youth to do things on their own and to seek help as needed, help the youth to be autonomous.

The **I AM** factors are the youth's internal, personal strengths. These are feelings, attitudes, and beliefs within the youth. A resilient youth has:

- **Self-esteem:** The youth feels proud of who they are and what they can do, and achieve. The youth does not let others belittle or degrade them.
- **Hope, faith, and trust:** The youth believes that there is hope for them, and that there are people and institutions that can be trusted.
- **Autonomy and responsibility:** The youth can do things on their own and accept the consequences of their behavior. The youth knows that what they do makes a difference

in how things develop, and accepts that responsibility. The youth understands the limits of their control over events, and recognizes when others are responsible.

- **Empathy:** The youth cares about what happens to others, and expresses that care through actions and words. The youth feels the discomfort and suffering of others and wants to do something to stop or share the suffering, or give comfort.

The **I CAN** factors are the youth's social and interpersonal skills. The resilient youth can:

- **Communicate:** The youth is able to express thoughts and feelings to others. They can listen to what others are saying and be aware of what they are feeling. The youth can reconcile differences and is able to understand, and act on, the results of the communication.
- **Problem solve:** The youth can assess the nature and scope of a problem, what they need to do to resolve it, and what help is needed from others. The youth can negotiate solutions with others and have the persistence to stay with a problem until it is solved.
- **Manage feelings and impulses:** The youth can recognize their feelings, give the emotions names, and express them in words and behaviors that do not violate the feelings and rights of others, or themselves.
- **Seek trusting relationships:** The youth can find someone — a parent, teacher, other adult, or peer — to ask for help, to share feelings and concerns, to explore ways to solve personal and interpersonal problems, or to discuss conflicts in the family.

It's important to note that no youth or parent will ever need to use the entire pool of resilience factors. Some will use many; others will use few. However, the larger the pool of

resilience factors, the more options they have and the more flexible they can be in selecting appropriate responses to a given, difficult, situation.

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