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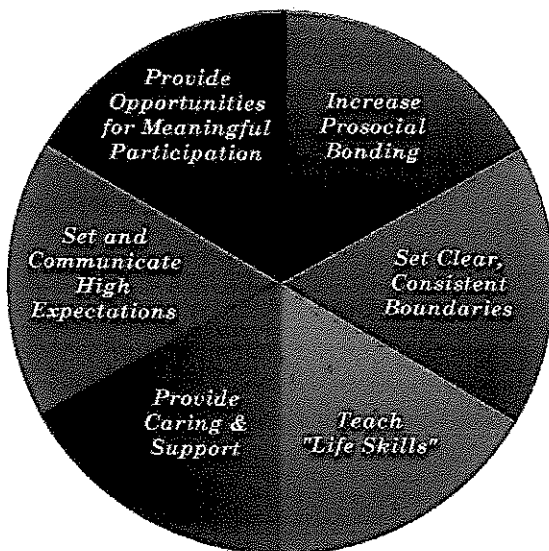
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The Resiliency Wheel provides an effective framework for crisis intervention with students.

### *The Resiliency Wheel*



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**Caring and support:** Listen to students' concerns and answer their questions in direct, factual, age-appropriate ways. (Be careful of giving TOO MUCH information, especially with younger children.)

**High expectations:** Express your certainty that students can cope with the situation and faith in their strength and inner resources.

**Opportunities for participation:** Help students come up with ways they can address the crisis themselves: i.e., raising money, sending cards and letters, forming a Peace Club.

**Prosocial bonding:** Provide students with positive activities to do together that give them a sense of purpose and mastery in the situation.

**Clear, consistent boundaries:** Strike a balance between addressing concerns and getting back to a normal schedule. Young people need the safety of familiar rules and routines.

**Life skills:** Encourage students to communicate their thoughts and feelings. (But balance is again the key: Don't let the talk escalate and overwhelm students).

For more information on crisis response and counseling, check out these web sites:

SAMHSA: <http://www.samhsa.gov/> (click on "crisis counseling")

U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/>

UCLA: [smhp.psych.ucla.edu](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu) (select topics of "Crisis Prevention and Response," "Grief and Bereavement" or "Post-Traumatic Stress")

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## The Foundations of the Resiliency Framework

by Bonnie Benard, M.S.W.

In the strictest sense, resiliency research refers to a body of international cross-cultural, lifespan developmental studies that followed children born into seriously high-risk conditions such as families where parents were mentally ill, alcoholic, abusive, or criminal, or in communities that were poverty-stricken or war-torn. The astounding finding from these long term studies was that at least 50% — and often closer to 70% — of youth growing up in these high-risk conditions did develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress and did overcome the odds to lead successful lives. Furthermore, these studies not only identified the characteristics of these “resilient” youth, several documented the characteristics of the environments — of the families, schools, and communities — that facilitated the manifestation of resilience.

### Resiliency Capacities

At the most fundamental level, resiliency research validates prior research and theory in human development that has clearly established the biological imperative for growth and development that exists in the human organism — that is part of our genetic makeup — and which unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental attributes. We are all born with innate resiliency, with the capacity to develop the traits commonly found in resilient survivors: social competence (responsiveness, cultural flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor); problem-solving (planning, help-seeking, critical and creative thinking); autonomy (sense of identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, task-mastery, and adaptive distancing from negative messages and conditions); and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future (goal direction, educational aspirations, optimism, faith, and spiritual connectedness) (Benard, 1991). The major point here is that resilience is not a genetic trait that only a few “superkids” possess, as some journalistic accounts (and even several researchers!) would have us believe. Rather, it is our inborn capacity for self-righting (Werner and Smith, 1992) and for transformation and change (Lifton, 1993).

### Environmental Protective Factors

Resiliency research, supported by research on child development, family dynamics, school effectiveness, community development, and ethnographic studies capturing the voices of youth themselves, documents clearly the characteristics of family, school, and community environments that elicit and foster the natural resiliency in children. These “protective factors,” the term referring to the characteristics of environments that appear to alter — or even reverse — potential negative outcomes and enable individuals to transform adversity and develop resilience despite risk, comprise three broad categories. Caring relationships convey compassion, understanding, respect, and interest, are grounded in listening, and establish safety and basic trust. High expectation messages communicate not only firm guidance, structure, and challenge but, and most importantly, convey a belief in the youth’s innate resilience and look for strengths and assets as opposed to problems and deficits.

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“Needed by all levels of military structure...what the military needs to support soldiers, sailors, marines, and their families.”

*Kent S. Muliken, (RET) Army Colonel,  
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Lastly, opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution include having opportunities for valued responsibilities, for making decisions, for giving voice and being heard, and for contributing one's talents to the community (Benard, 1991).

#### Knowledge Base For Practice

Resiliency research clearly provides the prevention, education, and youth development fields with nothing less than a fundamentally different knowledge base and paradigm for research and practice, one offering the promise of transforming interventions in the human arena. It situates risk in the broader social context of racism, war, and poverty — not in individuals, families, and communities — and asks how it is that youth successfully develop in the face of such stressors. It provides a powerful rationale for moving our narrow focus in the social and behavioral sciences from a risk, deficit, and pathology focus to an examination of the strengths youths, their families, their schools, and their communities have brought to bear in promoting healing and health.

The examination of these strengths and the acknowledgment that everyone has strengths and the capacity for transformation gives the prevention, education, and youth development fields not only a clear sense of direction — informing us about “what works!” — but also mandates we move beyond our obsession with risk identification, a statistically weaker practice that has harmfully labeled and stigmatized youth, their families, and their communities as at-risk and high-risk, a practice that perpetuates stereotyping and racism. Most importantly, the knowledge that everyone has innate resilience grounds practice in optimism and possibility, essential components in building motivation. Not only does this prevent the burn-out of practitioners working with seriously troubled youth but it provides one of the major protective factors — positive expectations — that when internalized by youth motivate and enable them to overcome risks and adversity.

#### Focus on Human Development

Resiliency research also offers the prevention, education, and youth development fields solid research evidence for placing human development at the center of everything we do. “Studies of resilience suggest that nature has provided powerful protective mechanisms for human development” (Maston, 1994) that “appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical, and historical boundaries” (Werner and Smith, 1992). This is precisely because they address our common, shared humanity. They meet our basic human needs for love and connectedness; for respect, challenge, and structure; and for meaningful involvement, belonging, power, and, ultimately, meaning. The development of resilience is none other than the process of healthy human development — a dynamic process in which personality and environmental influences interact in a reciprocal, transactional relationship. Resiliency research validates prior theoretical models of human development, including those of Erik Erikson, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Rudolf Steiner, Abraham Maslow, and Joseph Chilton Pierce. While focused on different components of human development — psycho/social, moral, spiritual, and cognitive — at the core of each of these approaches is an assumption of the biological imperative for growth and development (i.e., the self-righting nature of the human organism) which unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental attributes. Stated simply by Maston, “When adversity is relieved and basic human needs are restored, then resilience has a chance to emerge” (1994). The major implication from resiliency research for practice is that if we hope to create socially competent people who have a sense of their own identity and efficacy, who are able to make decisions, set goals, and believe in their future, then meeting their basic human needs for caring, connectedness, respect, challenge, power, and meaning must be the primary focus of any prevention, education, and youth development effort.

#### Emphasis on Process — Not Program!

Resiliency research has clearly shown that fostering resilience, i.e., promoting human development, is a process and not a program. In fact, Rutter encourages the use of the term protective processes which captures the dynamic nature of resilience instead of the commonly used protective factors: "The search is not for broadly defined factors but, rather, for the developmental and situational mechanisms involved in protective processes" (1987). Resiliency research thus promises to move the prevention, education, and youth development fields beyond their focus on program and what we do, to an emphasis on process and how we do what we do; to move beyond our fixation with content to a focus on context.

The fostering of resilience operates at a deep structural, systemic, human level: at the level of relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation and power that are a part of every interaction, every intervention no matter what the focus. As McLaughlin and her colleagues found in their extensive study of inner-city youth-serving neighborhood organizations, the organizations that engaged youth and facilitated their successful development had total diversity in program focus and content, organizational structure, and physical environment. What they shared was an emphasis on meeting the needs of the youth — over programmatic concerns — a belief in the potential of each youth, a focus on listening, and providing opportunities for real responsibility and real work. These researchers state, "We questioned the assumption that what works has to be a particular program. Our research shows that a variety of neighborhood-based programs work as long as there is an interaction between the program and its youth that results in those youths treating the program as a personal resource and a bridge to a hopeful future" (1994). Schorr's earlier exploration of successful prevention programs came to similar conclusions: child-centered programs based on the establishment of mutual relationships of care, respect, and trust between clients and professionals were the critical components in program effectiveness (1988).

## Summary

The voices of those who have overcome adversity — be they in longitudinal studies or some of the more recent ethnographic explorations — tell us loud and clear that ultimately resilience is a process of connectedness, of linking to people, to interests, and ultimately to life itself. Rutter states that, "Development is a question of linkages that happen within you as a person and also in the environment in which you live... Our hope lies in doing something to alter these linkages, to see that kids who start in a bad environment don't go on having bad environments and develop a sense of impotency" (in Pines, 1984). Similarly, James Coleman claims the most fundamental task for parents, educators, and policy makers is linking children into our social fabric. Our task is "to look at the whole fabric of our society and say, OWhere and how can children be lodged in this society? Where can we find a stable psychological home for children where people will pay attention to them?" (in Olson, 1987). Resiliency research shows the field that the blueprint for building this sense of home and place in the cosmos lies in relationships. To Werner and Smith, effective interventions must reinforce within every arena, the natural social bonds — between young and old, between siblings, between friends — "that give meaning to one's life and a reason for commitment and caring" (1982). Ultimately, research on resilience challenges the field to build this connectedness, this sense of belonging, by transforming our families, schools, and communities to become "psychological homes" wherein youth can find mutually caring and respectful relationships and opportunities for meaningful involvement. Ex-gang member Tito sums up most insightfully the message of resiliency research: "Kids can walk around trouble, if there is some place to walk to, and someone to walk with" (McLaughlin et al, 1994).

To create these places and to be that "someone," we must, first and foremost, support our own resilience. Building community and creating belonging for youth means we must also do this for ourselves. As Sergiovanni writes, "The need for community is universal. A sense of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas and values that make

ourselves meaningful and significant — these needs are shared by all of us" (1993). We, too, need the protective factors of caring and respectful relationships and opportunities to make decisions; without these, we cannot create them for youth.

We see learning as primarily a process of modeling; thus walking our talk is a basic operating principle of resilience work. We acknowledge this is a major challenge for educators and youth workers given we live in a society that doesn't place a high priority on children and youth nor on meeting the basic human needs of its people. This makes our work as caregivers of youth not only a challenge but a vital necessity.

Ultimately, resiliency research provides a mandate for social change — it is a clarion call for creating these relationships and opportunities in all human systems throughout the lifespan. Changing the status quo in our society means changing paradigms, both personally and professionally, from risk to resilience, from control to participation, from problem-solving to positive development, from Eurocentrism to multi-culturalism, from seeing youth as problems to seeing them as resources, from institution-building to community-building, and so on. Personally, fostering resilience is an inside-out, deep structure process of changing our own belief systems to see resources and not problems in youth, their families, and their cultures. However, fostering resilience also requires working on the policy level for educational, social, and economic justice.

Ultimately, it means transforming not only our families, schools, and communities but creating a society premised on meeting the needs of its citizens, young and old. Our greatest hope for doing just this lies with our youth and begins with our belief in them. We must know in our hearts that when we create communities wherever we are with youth that respect and care for them as individuals and invite their participation — their critical inquiry, dialogue, reflection, and action — we are creating the conditions that allow their innate potential for social competence, problem-solving, sense of identity and efficacy, and hope for the future to unfold. And, in the process, we are building a critical mass of future citizens who will, indeed, rescind the mean-spirited, greed-based, control-driven social policies we now have and recreate a social covenant grounded in social and economic justice.

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# The Resiliency Route to Authentic Self-Esteem and Life Success

by Nan Henderson, M.S.W.

A controversy is boiling about what is known as “feel-good” self-esteem.

At the heart of the controversy is the assertion that making oneself or someone else feel “special” by using methods such as looking in the mirror and saying “I AM somebody,” doesn’t do any good, and may do harm. One result, say some researchers, is that this type of “self-esteem building” produces “counterfeit positive self-assessment” (Rosemond, 2002) that can set people up for disappointment in the “real world.” This may be especially true for young people, who develop an unrealistic opinion about their “specialness”, only to be disillusioned “when life’s inevitable disappointments present themselves” (Smith & Elliott, 2001). In that disillusionment, kids may turn to alcohol, other drugs, violence, or other unhealthy escapist behavior.

I believe what people of all ages need is the “resiliency route to authentic self-esteem and life success”. This type of self-esteem is not the mere fluff of meaningless affirmations. It is based on recognizing actual accomplishment, identifying and understanding how we have and can use our strengths, and living a life filled with expressions of our unique “talents and gifts.”

Acquiring this “authentic self-esteem” starts by shifting our internal focus for ourselves—and for others, including our children—to a thorough appreciation and application of how we (or they) have “done as well as we’ve done.”

Every day of our lives, we all draw upon what researchers call our innate capacity for overcoming adversity. When dealing life’s small hassles, such as getting stuck in a traffic jam, or diffusing an argument with a coworker, or making the necessary arrangements to take care of a suddenly sick child, we draw upon this internal capacity for resiliency. Our children do this when they struggle through a difficult math lesson, figure out a way to get home when they miss the bus, or cope with an irritable parent. When a major life crisis hits, people draw upon this capacity in a much bigger way.

The first step on the resiliency route to self-esteem is to believe the resiliency research: that we do have an innate capacity for bouncing back. The second step is to identify our personal patterns of doing this. Ask yourself, or facilitate your child or your friend or your client asking themselves:

How have I done as well as I have done? What are the two or three biggest challenges (including crises or traumas) I have overcome in my life? What did I use to overcome them? What do I use every day to effectively cope with the typical stresses in my life?

In other words, what specific qualities, supports, skills, attitudes, aptitudes, and talents have we—or others—relied on to make it this far?

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“It will change your perspective on life!”

*Arlene McGill, M.D.,*

*Jamaica Dept. of Health*

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After making this list, I have found it helpful to look over the list of Personal Resiliency Builders—qualities researchers have identified as especially useful in overcoming adversity—and identifying which we most commonly use when we face a crisis, large or small. It is self-esteem building to help ourselves or others to see that we or they do have a few or even several of these research-based Resiliency Builders. These are, in fact, our personal lifelines to overcoming adversity.

#### PERSONAL RESILIENCY BUILDERS

(Individual Qualities that Facilitate Resiliency)

Put a check by the top three or four resiliency builders you use most often. Ask yourself how you have used these in the past or currently use them. Think of how you can best apply these resiliency builders to current life problems, crises, or stressors.

(Optional) You can then put a + by one or two resiliency builders you think you should add to your personal repertoire.

- ☐ Relationships — Sociability/ability to be a friend/ability to form positive relationships
- ☐ Humor — Has a good sense of humor
- ☐ Inner Direction — Bases choices/decisions on internal evaluation (internal locus of control)
- ☐ Perceptiveness — Insightful understanding of people and situations
- ☐ Independence — “Adaptive” distancing from unhealthy people and situations/autonomy
- ☐ Positive View of Personal Future – Optimism; expects a positive future
- ☐ Flexibility — Can adjust to change; can bend as necessary to positively cope with situations
- ☐ Love of Learning — Capacity for and connection to learning
- ☐ Self-motivation — Internal initiative and positive motivation from within
- ☐ Competence — Is “good at something”/personal competence
- ☐ Self-Worth — Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- ☐ Spirituality — Personal faith in something greater
- ☐ Perseverance — Keeps on despite difficulty; doesn’t give up
- ☐ Creativity — Expresses self through artistic endeavor

Give yourself (and others) credit for what you and they have gone through and overcome—and especially for whatever was used to do it! Even if you (or someone you love) currently faces a terrible problem, suspend focusing there, and take some time to thoroughly assess and appreciate what has already been accomplished. Then, ask of yourself or another: How can these strengths be used to overcome current life challenges?

This is a powerful approach. A school counselor told me recently how she applied it. A high school student, Sandy, was referred to this counselor because she was failing in two subjects, math and science. Normally, the counselor told me, she would immediately confront a student with the problem—in this case two failing grades—after making some brief small talk. Instead, after the small talk, she opened her session with this question: “Sandy, I have learned a little about your life. Tell me, how have you managed to do as well as you have done?” Sandy, the counselor reported, immediately burst into tears. “Never in all my years has anyone acknowledged what it has taken just to get to school,” she said. Most of the rest of the session was spent identifying all the strengths Sandy had used to “do as well as she had done.” Towards the end of the session, the counselor said, “Let’s talk about how you can use all these strengths you have shared to bring your grades up in math and science.”

The third step is to expand the list of resiliency-builders—ways we’ve overcome life’s challenges—to include other strengths. “What are my strengths? How can I capitalize on them? What one, two, or three things can I do better than 10,000 other people?” are additional questions we should ask or help someone else ask. (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

This composite list of resiliency builders and other qualities, talents, skills, and aptitudes paint the most important, but most often overlooked and undervalued, picture of who we are.

For the last 30 years The Gallup Organization has been conducting research into the best way to maximize a person's potential. Two of the findings are "each person's talents are enduring and unique," and "each person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength." One of the conclusions of this research is: "The real tragedy of life is not that each of us doesn't have enough strengths, it's that we fail to use the ones we have" (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). I would add another tragedy, connected to the first: We obsess about and overestimate the power of weakness, and we fail to recognize and underestimate the power of strengths.

Admittedly, using the resiliency route described here is not always easy to do. We live a culture obsessed with "what is wrong"—with our bodies, our homes, our leaders, our financial status, our material accumulation, our children. And we are very specific in naming all that is wrong: "My thighs are too fat," "My carpets are dirty," "My income is too low," or "You are too lazy," "Your room is too messy." Rarely are we as constant and specific in giving ourselves or others the credit that is due. This approach does not mean ignoring real problems—such as alcoholism, other self-destructive behavior, or an abusive, violent temper. But it does mean:

1. Giving ourselves and others credit for all we have overcome, all the ways we have demonstrated resiliency. And naming these accomplishments and the strengths we used in securing them as specifically as possible.
2. Spending time focusing on "how we (or others) have done as well as we've done", suspending the common obsession with what hasn't yet been accomplished.
3. Identifying other strengths—important lessons learned, virtues, talents, skills and capabilities, how we help or serve others, all the best things about being who we are.
4. Maximizing these strengths as the best path to success, and using them to solve current life problems.

The final step on "the resiliency route to authentic self-esteem and life success" is finding ways to live our strengths, to use them to the utmost as much as possible. "Too many individuals hide their 'sundials in the shade'" conclude the authors of the Gallup research (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Rather than obsessing about correcting all our weaknesses, we should put our strengths to work for us, they advise. "Become an expert at finding and describing and applying and practicing and refining your strengths."

The happiest and most productive individuals are those who do just this, states Martin Seligman (2001), past president of the American Psychological Association (APA) and a leading resiliency researcher. Dr. Seligman and several colleagues are spearheading a shift in psychology based on a recognition of the power and importance of human strengths. They have recently formed a new branch of psychology within the APA to create "a science of human strength to compliment the science of healing" (Seligman, 1998).

Ironically, social scientists are finding that achieving healing is more likely to occur through employing a focus on clients' strengths. People dealing with the serious problems mentioned above have historically struggled in therapies and programs that ignored their strengths. Fortunately, "the strength approach" to helping people heal is gaining greater acceptance as a more powerful and successful approach.

"People are more motivated to change when their strengths are supported," concludes Dennis Saleebey (2001), editor of *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*. People I have interviewed who have left gangs, recovered from alcohol and other drug

addiction, made it successfully through college despite a childhood of abuse, or overcome other significant traumas have told me the same thing. "The people who helped me the most were the ones who told me 'what is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong with you,'" a young man who successfully completed college despite a childhood of living in one foster home after another told me (Henderson, 1999).

That is the most important message to give ourselves as well as we take "the resiliency route to authentic self-esteem and life success."

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"[Your trainings] should be packed. Teachers and all educators should come by the busloads...to learn what to do for everything that ails our kids."

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## Hard-Wired to Bounce Back

**Researchers are documenting an innate “self-righting tendency” that exists in everyone. How can you use their findings to help yourself and help others be more resilient?**



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by Nan Henderson, M.S.W.

Can individuals learn to be more resilient, or are some just born with the ability to bounce back from adversity? Both, according to researchers, whose work suggests that human beings are born with an innate self-righting ability, which can be helped or hindered. Their findings are fueling a major shift in thinking about human development: from obsessing about problems and weaknesses to recognizing “the power of the positive”—identifying and building individual and environmental strengths that help people to overcome difficulties, achieve happiness, and attain life success.

After 15 years of studying and reflecting upon the myriad studies on human resiliency, dialoguing with thousands of people of all ages about the topic, and writing extensively about resiliency, I have come to believe that individuals are hard-wired to bounce back from adversity. I also believe everyone can expand this innate capacity for resiliency within themselves and others. People bounce back in two ways: they draw upon their own internal resources, and they encounter people, organizations, and activities that provide them with the conditions that help the emergence of their resilience. Psychologists call these internal and external conditions “protective factors” and conclude, “these buffers” are more powerful in a person’s life than risks or traumas or stress. They fuel the movement towards healthy development.

I have identified four basic characteristics of resiliency building that add the power of “protective factors” to people’s lives. I have observed that the most successful educators and counselors, the best parenting, and the companies identified as “the best places to work in America” utilize these approaches. They are also the best “self-help” strategies and can be used to overcome the loss of a loved one or a job, cope with a major illness, or successfully navigate the challenges of raising children.

Some resiliency researchers theorize that these conditions are actually basic human needs across the life span, that from birth to death everyone does better in environments that embody them.

**1. Communicate “The Resiliency Attitude.”** The first “protective” strategy is communicating the attitude, “You have what it takes to get through this!” in words and deeds. I interviewed a young man a few years ago who had lived a painful life full of loss and abuse. Most of his adolescence was spent in one foster home after another. He told me that what helped him the most in attaining his own resilient outcome were the people along the way that told him, “What is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong.”

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In my trainings, people tell me that this is difficult to do. For example, a child who is skipping class and responding with anger and belligerence to any offer of help, presents a typical paradox: At the very same time a person is weighed down with problems in one area of life, he or she also has strengths somewhere else—times when obstacles have been overcome in the past; talents or skills or passions that can be focused on and developed in the present. The challenge is to both be aware of the problems and to draw upon the strengths of the person to help solve them, as well as to sincerely communicate the belief that the current problems can be successfully overcome.

**2. Adopt a “Strengths Perspective.”** “The keystone of high achievement and happiness is exercising your strengths,” rather than focusing on weaknesses, concludes resiliency researcher Seligman (2001), past president of the American Psychological Association. I recently asked a group of teenagers and adults to identify their strengths. Both ages were at a loss—neither group could name strengths, and both were hesitant to share out loud even tentative ideas about what their strengths might be. So I asked the group to identify a challenge or problem they had recently overcome in their lives.

The kids talked about having to move to another school, the death of grandparents, their parents’ divorce, struggling with difficult subjects in school, being rejected by a club or social group or sports team. The adults talked about changing jobs, leaving bad relationships, stopping smoking, losing weight, and losses of friends and family, as well.

Next I asked, “List what within yourself or outside yourself helped you overcome these problems and losses.” I had the group compare their lists to a list of individual strengths researchers have found are particularly useful in overcoming adversity, individual protective factors that I call “personal resiliency builders.” (See list below.) Almost everyone saw that they had used two or three—or more—of these in the recent past, such things as drawing upon positive personal relationships in their lives, their sense of humor, or their spiritual faith. “How can you use these same strengths in successfully dealing with current problems in your lives?” I asked the group.

A school counselor told me recently how she applied this approach. A high school student was referred to the counselor because the girl was failing two subjects, math and science. Normally, the counselor told me, she would immediately confront the student with the problem—in this case two failing grades—after making some brief small talk. Instead, after the small talk, she opened her session with this question: “Sandy, I have learned a little about your life. Tell me, how have you *managed to do as well as you have done?*” Sandy, the counselor told me, immediately burst into tears. “Never in all my years has anyone acknowledged what it has taken just to get to school,” she said. Most of the rest of the session was spent identifying all the strengths and supports Sandy had used to “do as well as she had done.” Toward the end of the session, the counselor said, “Let’s talk about how you can use all these things to bring your grades up in math and science.”

### **3. Surround Each Person—as well as Families and Organizations—with all elements of “The Resiliency Wheel.”**

I first developed the model of The Resiliency Wheel in 1996. It is a synthesis of the environmental protective conditions that research indicates everyone can benefit from having in their lives. I realized that these six elements of environmental protection are also extremely useful in assisting families and even organizations bounce back from adversity. In the past decade, The Resiliency Wheel has been adopted as the primary organizational rubric for helping children, youth, adults, and families by numerous local, regional, and state agencies.

- **Provide Care and Support.** Ask yourself or assess for others, “What would be very nurturing right now?” “How can I best show compassion to myself or the person I am trying to help?” Often simply finding or providing a good listening ear is extremely resiliency-building. So is uplifting music, time in nature, or reading an inspiring book.

Providing oneself and others with unconditional positive regard, love, and encouragement is the most powerful external resiliency-builder.

- **Set High, but Realistic, Expectations for Success.** Effectively using this strategy involves identifying and supporting steps in the right direction rather than demanding instant perfection. One middle school I worked with changed its "Honor Roll" program to an "On A Roll" program. In order to be recognized as "On A Roll" students need only raise their grades one letter. Everyone who does this is rewarded as "on a roll." A couple of the teachers in this school confided to me, "We were amazed at how many of our gangsters decided to participate!" Their comment reinforced the resiliency finding that people have within them, as resiliency researchers Werner and Smith (1992) state, "an innate self-righting tendency that moves them towards normal human development." It also shows the power of recognizing and rewarding small steps of progress.
- **Provide Opportunities for "Meaningful Contribution" to Others.** Paradoxically, one of the best ways to bounce back from personal problems is help someone else with theirs. Traumatized kids, for example, who are offered opportunities to be of genuine help to others who need it are often most helped themselves through this opportunity. A foster parent told me after one of my presentations that giving the boys in his care the opportunity to serve disabled vets at the local community veterans' center did more for the boys than any other strategy he'd tried to help them. Suddenly, these boys were in a new, and very healing, role. They were now resources, rather than problems. This strategy, he said, was life changing.

In the wake of the 9/11 tragedies, a consistent message of psychologists interviewed about how to get through that time was, "Make a positive contribution in some way. Give whatever you have to give."

- **Increase Positive Bonds and Connections.** People who are positively bonded to other people (through a network of friends and family and/or clubs or organizations) and to enjoyable activities do better in life. This fact has been documented extensively by psychological and medical research. Reaching out to connect with someone, some group, or some activity that is positive is another strategy to successfully cope with adversity. In fact, several arenas of research are documenting that people who have more social connection and participate in enjoyable hobbies/activities lead physically and mentally healthier lives. As Ornish (2005) wrote:

Love and intimacy are at the root of what makes us sick and what makes us well. If a new medication had the same impact, failure to prescribe it would be malpractice. Connections with other people affect not only the quality of our lives but also our survival. Study after study find that people who feel lonely are many times more likely to get cardiovascular disease than those who have a strong sense of connection and community. I'm not aware of any other factor in medicine—not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery—that has a greater impact on our quality of life....

- **Set and Maintain Clear Boundaries.** Feeling safe, knowing what to expect, and not being overwhelmed also builds resiliency. This means developing or encouraging in others the ability to say "no" appropriately, to stand up for oneself when necessary, and to provide whatever means are needed to feel a sense of safety. Setting and enforcing clear and consistent "family rules" or school or other organizational policies are part of this process, and are particularly powerful resiliency-builders for children and youth. Anything that increases the feeling of inner security makes it easier to bounce back.
- **Develop Needed Life Skills.** A new life circumstance, a never-before-experienced problem or crisis, a change in a job or a relationship or a familiar role almost always requires new "life skills." Good communication and listening skills, healthy conflict

resolution, how to assert oneself appropriately are some of the life skills needed every day. When encountering new adversity, asking, "What life skills that I have can I use here?" or "What new life skills do I need to learn?" is another useful strategy in successfully meeting the challenge.

When I worked in an adolescent treatment center several years ago, I used to ask drug-abusing young people how they wound up in treatment. The most common response went something like this: "I got to middle school and felt lost. I didn't have any friends. I didn't know how to navigate in this big, strange, impersonal place. So, I did the only thing I saw to do. I went out behind the gym and joined the group there lighting up and drinking. I had an instant group of friends, and my problems kind of went away." In retrospect, the kids admitted this wasn't the best way to handle things, but in the absence of having the relationship and problem-solving skills they needed, it seemed the only option available to them. Kids, and adults, need skills about how to successfully cope with new challenges each stage of our lives brings our way.

Developing life skills, in fact, is one effective strategy that all prevention programs for youth—including substance abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention, suicide prevention, and school drop-out prevention—agree is crucial.

**4. Give It Time.** A resilient outcome requires patience. A few years ago, I interviewed Leslie, a young woman then 16 years old who had just finished the ninth grade on her fourth try! I asked Leslie how she was able to finally get through ninth grade. Leslie shared with me the two main reasons she had made it: First, her single-parent mom, who refused to give up on her, even during the years she was skipping school, using drugs, and lying. Secondly, the small alternative school her mother had eventually found for her that embodied the four strategies outlined here. "Where would Leslie be if she hadn't had at least one person who stuck with her until she finally got through ninth grade?" I thought. Stories like this one have convinced me not to give up—on myself, on children, on my friends and family going through hard times.

Collectively, these strategies represent the shift from the deficit and weakness approaches to human development prevalent in the past several decades, to what is now being called a "strengths approach." This shift is taking place in education, psychology, other social services, and in the corporate world. Saleebey, editor of *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (2001), emphasizes the importance of this shift. "People are most motivated to change when their strengths are supported," he states.

What has transpired since September 11, 2001, including hurricane Katrina and other national disasters, will perhaps hasten this process. A silver lining to these horrific tragedies is the word "resiliency" is now constantly used in the national media. The collective national attention has at least somewhat refocused to also document the amazing goodness of human nature: the courage, the kindness, the generosity, the tenacity that is every much a part of humanity as its weaknesses. If the resiliency researchers are right these strengths, in the long run, are the most powerful. Identifying, celebrating, reinforcing, and nurturing the growth of these positive human traits is the most important skill we can collectively develop to help ourselves and others be more resilient.

### **Personal Resiliency Builders**

(Individual Protective Factors that Facilitate Resiliency)

*Researchers note that each person develops a cluster of three or four of these he or she uses most often in times of difficulty.*

*You can help yourself or help others become more resilient by reflecting on these questions:*

1. When faced with a crisis or major life difficulty, which of these do you use most often?
2. How can you strengthen your individual "resiliency builders"?
3. Can you use them now in problems you are facing?
4. Is there another one you think would be helpful for you? If so, how can you develop it?

**Relationships** — Sociability/ability to be a friend/ability to form positive relationships

**Service** — Giving of yourself to help other people; animals; organizations; and/or social causes

**Humor** — Having and using a good sense of humor

**Inner Direction** — Basing choices/decisions on internal evaluation (internal locus of control)

**Perceptiveness** — Insightful understanding of people and situations

**Independence** — "Adaptive" distancing from unhealthy people and situations/autonomy

**Positive View of Personal Future** — Optimism; expecting a positive future

**Flexibility** — Can adjust to change; can bend as necessary to positively cope with situations

**Love of Learning** — Capacity for and connection to learning

**Self-motivation** — Internal initiative and positive motivation from within

**Competence** — Being "good at something"/personal competence

**Self-Worth** — Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence

**Spirituality** — Personal faith in something greater

**Perseverance** — Keeping on despite difficulty; doesn't give up

**Creativity** — Expressing yourself through artistic endeavor, or through other means of creativity

### Understanding Resiliency: A Glossary

**Protective Factors:** People overcome adversity through drawing upon their own internal strengths (see box) and through encountering situations in their environments that embody the nine recommendations described here. These internal and environmental characteristics are called "protective factors" by researchers. They hypothesize that people who do better when faced with tragedy or trauma access more protective factors than those who don't do as well.

**Lifespan Research:** Most resiliency studies are based on life span, i.e. longitudinal, research that follows a group of individuals for decades. The most famous of these studies in the U.S., conducted by psychologists Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, began in 1955. These researchers continue to this day to study all the children born on the island of Kauai that year. The value of this type of research is that it does more than identify risks or problems. It documents exactly how people bounce back their risks and problems.

**Strengths-Approach:** Results of resiliency research are fueling a shift in psychology, other helping professions, education, and corporate management. These fields are beginning to focus not just on human weaknesses and problems but on better understanding what helps us bounce back from these problems. The American Psychological Association, under the leadership of the resiliency researcher Martin Seligman, recently established a new branch called Positive Psychology. "What is needed now," Dr. Seligman said in a 1998 speech to the National Press Club, "is the creation of a science of human strengths—how they grow and how you can maximize or minimize them. The best set of buffers we have against substance abuse, against depression, against violence in our children have to do with human strengths," he continued, "...identifying [them], amplifying [them], nurturing [them], getting [people] to lead their lives around them."

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## The Resiliency Quiz

by Nan Henderson, M.S.W.

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I developed this quiz for anyone—teens, adults, elders—to assess and strengthen the resiliency building conditions in their lives. Use it for yourself or use it as a tool to help others you care about build their resiliency.

### PART ONE:

Do you have the conditions in your life that research shows help people to be resilient?

People bounce back from tragedy, trauma, risks, and stress by having the following “protective” conditions in their lives. The more times you answer yes (below), the greater the chances you can bounce back from your life’s problems “with more power and more smarts.” And doing that is a sure way to increase self-esteem.

Answer yes or no to the following. Celebrate your “yes” answers and decide how you can change your “no” answers to “yes.” (You can also answer “sometimes” if that is more accurate than just “yes” or “no”.)

#### 1. Caring and Support

\_\_\_\_\_ I have several people in my life who give me unconditional love, nonjudgmental listening, and who I know are “there for me.”

\_\_\_\_\_ I am involved in a school, work, faith, or other group where I feel cared for and valued.

\_\_\_\_\_ I treat myself with kindness and compassion, and take time to nurture myself (including eating right and getting enough sleep and exercise).

#### 2. High Expectations for Success

\_\_\_\_\_ I have several people in my life who let me know they believe in my ability to succeed.

\_\_\_\_\_ I get the message “You can succeed,” at my work or school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I believe in myself most of the time, and generally give myself positive messages about my ability to accomplish my goals—even when I encounter difficulties.

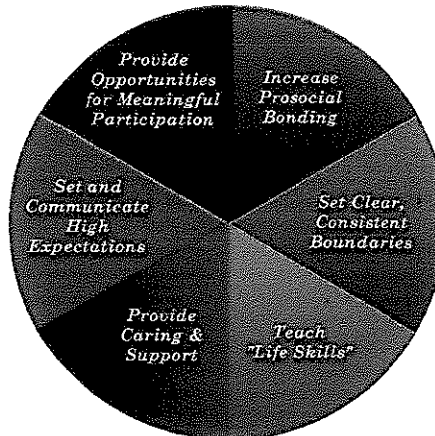
#### 3. Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

\_\_\_\_\_ My voice (opinion) and choice (what I want) is heard and valued in my close personal relationships.

\_\_\_\_\_ My opinions and ideas are listened to and respected at my work or school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I volunteer to help others or a cause in my community, faith organization, or school.

### The Resiliency Wheel



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“No other workshop in 12 years of teaching has touched me so deeply.”

Kathy Hancock,  
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## 4. Positive Bonds

\_\_\_\_\_ I am involved in one or more positive after-work or after-school hobbies or activities.

\_\_\_\_\_ I participate in one or more groups (such as a club, faith community, or sports team) outside of work or school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I feel "close to" most people at my work or school.

## 5. Clear and Consistent Boundaries

\_\_\_\_\_ Most of my relationships with friends and family members have clear, healthy boundaries (which include mutual respect, personal autonomy, and each person in the relationship both giving and receiving).

\_\_\_\_\_ I experience clear, consistent expectations and rules at my work or in my school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I set and maintain healthy boundaries for myself by standing up for myself, not letting others take advantage of me, and saying "no" when I need to.

## 6. Life Skills

\_\_\_\_\_ I have (and use) good listening, honest communication, and healthy conflict resolution skills.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have the training and skills I need to do my job well, or all the skills I need to do well in school.

\_\_\_\_\_ I know how to set a goal and take the steps to achieve it.

## PART TWO:

People also successfully overcome life difficulties by drawing upon internal qualities that research has shown are particularly helpful when encountering a crisis, major stressor, or trauma.

The following list can be thought of as a "personal resiliency builder" menu. No one has everything on this list. When "the going gets tough" you probably have three or four of these qualities that you use most naturally and most often.

It is helpful to know which are your primary resiliency builders; how have you used them in the past; and how can you use them to overcome the present challenges in your life.

You can also decide to add one or two of these to your "resiliency-builder" menu, if you think they would be useful for you.

## PERSONAL RESILIENCY BUILDERS

(Individual Qualities that Facilitate Resiliency)

Put a + by the top three or four resiliency builders you use most often. Ask yourself how you have used these in the past or currently use them. Think of how you can best apply these resiliency builders to current life problems, crises, or stressors.

(Optional) You can then put a □ by one or two resiliency builders you think you should add to your personal repertoire.

☐ Relationships — Sociability/ability to be a friend/ability to form positive relationships

☐ Service — Giving of yourself to help other people; animals; organizations; and/or social causes

☐ Humor — Having and using a good sense of humor

☐ Inner Direction — Basing choices/decisions on internal evaluation (internal locus of control)

☐ Perceptiveness — Insightful understanding of people and situations

☐ Independence — "Adaptive" distancing from unhealthy people and situations/autonomy

☐ Positive View of Personal Future — Optimism; expecting a positive future

☐ Flexibility — Can adjust to change; can bend as necessary to positively cope with situations

- ☐ Love of Learning — Capacity for and connection to learning
- ☐ Self-motivation — Internal initiative and positive motivation from within
- ☐ Competence — Being “good at something”/personal competence
- ☐ Self-Worth — Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- ☐ Spirituality — Personal faith in something greater
- ☐ Perseverance — Keeping on despite difficulty; doesn't give up
- ☐ Creativity — Expressing yourself through artistic endeavor, or through other means of creativity

You Can Best Help Yourself or Someone Else Be More Resilient by...

1. Communicating the Resiliency Attitude: “What is right with you is more powerful than anything wrong with you.”
2. Focusing on the person's strengths more than problems and weaknesses, and asking “How can these strengths be used to overcome problems?” One way to do this is to help yourself or another identify and best utilize top personal resiliency builders listed in The Resiliency Quiz Part Two.
3. Providing for yourself or another the conditions listed in The Resiliency Quiz Part One.
4. Having patience...successfully bouncing back from a significant trauma or crisis takes time.

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“Every school and every child will benefit from using the recommendations in *The Resiliency Workbook*, which - from my experience - promote student success and staff effectiveness.”

*Dr. Gerald Zahorchak,  
State of PA Secretary of Education, 2006 – 2010*

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## What is Resiliency and Why is it So Important?

November 2, 2012 by Nan Henderson 3 Comments

Resiliency is the ability to overcome challenges of all kinds—trauma, tragedy, personal crises, plain 'ole' life problems—and bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.



It's important because this is what we need to do when faced with life's inevitable difficulties. AND it's important because there is a growing body of social science research that explains how: How can you bounce back, even from a lifetime of "risk factors" or very painful trauma or tragedy, and how can you help those you care about bounce back?

This is the most useful under-publicized research information everybody should know. There are steps you can take today and every day to make it more likely that you will bounce back from any problem or challenge "stronger, smarter & with more self-esteem..."and more likely your family and others you care about will bounce back, too.

My work and writing is dedicated to sharing these life-correcting, life-strengthening strategies. My latest book, *The Resiliency Workbook*, synthesizes my 20 years of studying resiliency into a useable-by-anyone format. I am excited about this book because it makes the decades of social science research on how people can overcome accessible to everyone!

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Filed Under: Resiliency

## Comments

Bruce Mayhall Rastrelli says:

September 6, 2014 at 4:11 pm

Hi Nan:

As one who overcame a lot of risk factors (at least I have up to this point), I am very interested in this research. And as a scholar of the life and work of composer Billy Strayhorn, I am even more. Last spring in the work of Beverly Greene I ran across a reference to an article by one F. Jones that specifically discusses his biography in awareness of the work of psychologists working in this area of expertise. Here's the cite:

Jones, F. (1997, March). Eloquent anonymity [Review of the book *Lush life: A biography of Billy Strayhorn*]. Readings: A Journal of Reviews and Commentary in Mental Health, 12, 10–14.

I've exhausted every research tool I possess to find it, and can't. Are you aware of this work? Do you know the case of Billy Strayhorn? I want to learn more!

Best,  
Bruce

Reply

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