

Building Resilience

What is resilience and why is it important?

How do people deal with hardship and difficult events that often change their lives? We all experience hard times – across the different seasons of our lives – although some of us seem to experience more than others. These hard times can be short-term (temporary job loss or the death of someone you loved) or can occur over many years (living in poor neighborhood conditions or in a harsh family climate). Hardship and difficult events can negatively affect multiple areas of our lives.

Some people experience difficult life events or are exposed to hardship over long periods of time, but still have positive outcomes. They “beat the odds.” This is the basic idea behind resilience – despite adversity, you are able to adapt (“bounce back”) and maintain your health and wellbeing.

Sources of resilience

The behaviors, thoughts and actions linked to resilience can be learned and developed. People demonstrate resilience every day – it’s not a trait that you either have or don’t have. Multiple factors contribute to resilience. Many studies show that having caring and supportive relationships, within and outside the family, is the most important factor associated with resilience.

For example, children raised in a supportive family environment, despite facing poverty or other hardships, are:

- Better able to get along with others in their interpersonal relationships.
- Better able to adjust their behavior and have fewer behavioral problems.
- Less prone to depression.

Similar benefits are observed when children develop a close bond with other adults who accept them unconditionally, such as an older sibling, grandparent, neighbor, teacher, or community elder.

Additional factors associated with resilience, include:

- Being able to make a realistic plan and then taking the steps necessary to carry out the plan.
- Having a positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities.
- Demonstrating skills in communication and problem solving.
- Being able to manage strong feelings and impulses.

Strategies for building resilience

One approach to building resilience that the investigators at the Center for Translational and Prevention Science (CTAPS) are studying is called “Shift and Persist.” The components of this strategy are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Shift and Persist Components	
Component	Resilience Building Activity
Acceptance	Think about sources of stress that are outside your control. Practice statements that show acceptance of these situations. “Sometimes I just have to live with things the way they are.”
Controlling emotions	Reconsider the situation. Think about a stressful event in your life and think about the positives instead of the negatives. “Something good did come out of that event.” “In the end, it wasn’t as big of a deal as it seemed at the time.”
Finding meaning and purpose in life	Think about the one good thing in your life. Write about it. How is it related to what is important in your life? In what ways does it add meaning to your life?
Being optimistic and focusing on the future	Think of different stressful situations and brainstorm positive versus negative ways to react to them. When something stressful happens, try to think about the future instead of what is happening now. What is the one thing that you want in your future? How could you imagine getting there?
Maintaining and pursuing goals	Think about your longer-term goals. Brainstorm steps you need to take to achieve your goals.

Building resilience is a personal journey. You need to pick strategies that have meaning and will work for you. Other approaches to building resilience include:

- **Making connections and fostering good relationships with close family members, friends or others who are important to you.** Be willing to accept help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you. Being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations, or other local groups that also provide social support.
- **Taking action.** Take concrete steps to address hardship or a difficult life event instead of just wishing they would just go away.
- **Nurturing a positive view of yourself.** Trust your instincts and have confidence in your ability to solve problems when they arise.

- **Taking care of yourself.** Engage in activities you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. By taking care of yourself you can keep your mind and body ready to deal with situations that require resilience.

Sources

1. American Psychological Association, The Road to Resilience, found at <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx> , accessed on 2/27/2015.
2. Chen, E., & Miller, G. E. (2012). “Shift-and-Persist” Strategies Why Low Socioeconomic Status Isn’t Always Bad for Health. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(2), 135-158.