

# **Resiliency and Protective Factors**

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## Introduction

How many times have we said “that’s not fair” and been told “no one ever said life was fair” in our lifetime? If you are like most people, this exchange has happened at least a handful of times. There are a few different ways you may have approached this exchange. Perhaps you accepted that life isn’t fair and there was nothing you could do about it: Defeat. If this was the case suffering might have become a recurrent and unresolved theme in your life.

Maybe you heard this and thought you could find a way to make an unfair situation fairer. With this approach you might have experienced challenges associated with change and discovered there are many different ways to either succeed or fail in trying to effect change. Whichever road you travelled down, hardship was most likely a main component with varying levels of length and severity of suffering.

Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, with the ability to bounce back after a literal or metaphorical ‘fall’. Early and middle childhood experiences and social connections play a critical role in determining to what extent we are able to experience resiliency throughout our lifetime. If a child is nourished with important protective factors, resiliency is a likely outcome. When equipped with the right tools parents, educators, mentors and peers all have the ability to provide an environment rich in protective factors.

One important element in providing an environment which promotes resiliency is utilization of a strengths-based approach.

## What is a strengths-based approach?

The strengths-based approach emerged from the field of social work and follows a set of ideas, assumptions, and techniques that promote self-determination, social justice, resiliency, recovery, and the ability to thrive in one’s community and personal life. The following are key examples of some values in the strengths-based philosophy:

- People experiencing challenges are active participants in the helping process
- All people have strengths, sometimes untapped or unrecognized
- Strengths foster motivation for growth through the ability to experience competency, self-determinism, and social connectivity.

## Nurturing Resiliency

The following are examples of how to nurture resiliency:

- The belief that all individuals of all ages and all ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds have strengths.
- Striving to actively identify personal strengths in all individuals you interact with, particularly individuals you struggle to connect with (looking beyond any known or suspected problems).
- Helping individuals identify and believe in their strengths (help to name strengths, show how they are being used, help identify ways they can use their strengths in the future).
- Asking others to help you identify your own strengths and engaging in a conversation that explores how you can use your strengths in certain situations (sometimes others learn how to identify personal strengths by getting to know other peoples strengths).
- Give it time with patience and belief in eventual success (persist with respect for individual time trajectories).

## 6 Protective Factors and Resiliency

### *Increase bonding or connectedness*

The biological architecture of our brains are heavily influenced by the social interactions we have with others and our ability to both relate and appreciate our differences. The psychological development of our minds is interconnected with this biology; our biology influences our psychological experience and our psychological experience influences our biological development. In essence, nature depends on nurture.

Human beings are social creatures and depend upon one another to both survive and thrive. When we feel alienated from others, self-esteem and self-image ratings are compromised. We either doubt our own worth, the worth of others, or both. When we feel connected to others, with a genuine experience of bonding, we feel worthwhile and optimistic about our future.

The most useful way to assist a trauma survivor experience resiliency is to help them genuinely feel like they belong and are connected socially to others around them.

### *Set clear and consistent boundaries*

Clear and consistent boundaries enable people of all ages to feel safe. Part of feeling safe is understanding what you can and cannot do and how to go about staying in the boundaries set. Another part of feeling safe is trusting such boundaries apply to everyone. This means such boundaries apply to students *and* teachers, employee *and* employer, child *and* parent, etc.

When boundaries are not clear or consistent, fears begin to manifest. Fear of acceptance, fear of trust, fear of reprimand, fear of not belonging, and fear of not being accepted can all enable a trauma survivor to experience retraumatization.

Traumatized children are not in the position to thrive so much as attempt to survive and educational systems notice. Poor school attendance, inattention in class, disruptions in class and peer conflicts are all good indicators of a child in distress and all experiences that prevent learning objectives from being fully reached.

Setting clear and consistent boundaries enables a child to experience a reliable learning environment and feel safe interacting with their peers and adults. This also affords a child to recognize with greater cognitive understanding when they are in an unsafe environment and might even provide them with valuable tools if this occurs. Emotional safety enhances both learning and memory and promotes positive emotional experiences for both one's self and others.

### *Teach life skills*

Learning how to gain independence enables a child to develop a positive sense of autonomy. Life skills are both pragmatic and social tools that allow the developing mind to flourish. When children are able to utilize these skills to connect with others, via tutoring, mentoring or participating in an activity with others, the sense of belonging and self-value gained promotes resiliency.

The process of teaching life skills affords adults with the ability to instill the following short sample of developmental assets critical for instilling resiliency: connectivity to others, clear and consistent boundaries, caring and supportive relationship, high and realistic expectations, and opportunities to participate. Such developmental assets have empirically demonstrated positive developmental outcomes, such as an increased ability to succeed in school and maintain good health and a decreased risk of alcohol use and violence (Search Institute, 2001).

### *Provide a caring and supportive relationship*

When people feel lost or confused about a current or expected life experience they tend to reach out to a friend, teacher, mentor or family member they feel close to. But what happens if we don't have anyone to turn to? Who do we turn to in our hour of need and how selective are we? And if we don't turn to anyone, do we have the necessary tools to progress past such negative feelings?

Caring and supportive relationships enable us to feel valuable. The people we turn to in our hour of need might not have the answers we are searching for and might not even have useful advice. These relationships do offer ears to listen with and knowledge of our personal strengths that might have been forgotten or lost in our emotional experience. And the encouragement we gain from such relationships fuels resiliency.

### *Set and communicate high and realistic expectations*

When setting high and realistic expectations we are basically conveying confidence in one's ability to succeed. We aren't saying it will be easy and we aren't saying there won't be stumbles along the way, but we are saying that we believe in another person's ability to thrive. The ability to experience resiliency hinges on one's ability to believe in their ability to succeed and the optimism to keep trying.

This developmental asset can be challenging to endure for trauma survivors, depending on the length, severity, and complexity of trauma. Because of this, many helping adults experience frustration after having heard "I can't do this" for the hundredth time! This frustration has the very real capacity to transfer onto the child with the unintended message of "you are annoying" or "maybe you can't do this". For this reason, adult helpers are encouraged to monitor their levels of frustration in terms of identifying creative strategies that might help more effectively and maybe engage in a conversation about what strengths that child has that lead you to believe they can accomplish the expectation.

Trauma survivors sometimes believe they are experts at hiding 'failures' or 'weaknesses' from others. Hearing praise or expressions of confidence solidifies the belief that they have successfully hidden the things they don't like about themselves. Unfortunately, this oftentimes results in a compromised ability to see strengths. Because of this, conversations on strengths must be two-sided in order to be effective. Adult helpers are encouraged to ask open-ended questions to help the child process thoughts that might be barriers to success.

The most important part of this protective factor is the qualifying word *realistic*. If I am expecting a student with poor attendance and chronic tardiness to never be late again and to attend class every single day without exception I am not only being unrealistic, but I am setting them up to fail. One unintentional consequence of setting unrealistic expectations can be a perpetual loop of the statement “I can’t”. If a person gets stuck on what they believe they “can’t” do, they lose sight of what they *can* do. For this reason, it is important for adults to set high expectations for what a child can realistically succeed at.

Setting expectations too low can convey the message that competency is low and praise for success becomes relatively shallow. Children who are praised for succeeding at meeting too low of expectations are at an increased risk for experiencing endurance challenges in the face of high expectations. Follow-through can be a challenge for those given too high of praise for little effort and confidence in one’s ability to achieve success from high expectations can become compromised.

The only way to know whether you are setting appropriately high and realistic expectations is to have some idea of who the individual is that you are working with. And the only way to know that is to take the time to develop some sort of connection that affords you the ability to know their strengths and challenges. This knowledge will afford you the ability to know when to reevaluate the degree of difficulty, assess whether some short-term goals might be useful steps towards the objective, and determine if the experience is impacting the individual in the desired way.

### *Provide opportunities for meaningful participation*

Nothing feels better than being part of a group that accepts you for who you are and appreciates the talents you bring to the collective whole. And to be able to appreciate the talents others bring to the group you are in feels equally special for most people. It simply feels good to belong and to embrace others. On the other hand, nothing feels worse than being picked last for a team or being socially rejected from group activities.

This protective factor is important for resiliency because it instills the belief that a person can meaningfully contribute to a group activity, can meaningfully benefit from belonging to a group, and that there is something inherently good about them that is accepted and valued by others. When one believes they have value in their community they are at an advantage to endure rough patches because they can recall a time when their presence warranted acceptance and appreciation.

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