

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.”

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.

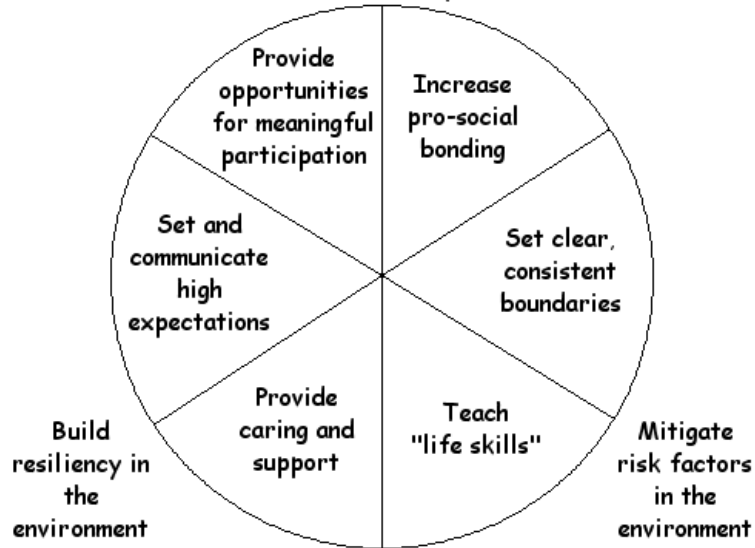
Next I asked, “List what within yourself or outside yourself helped you overcome these problems and losses.” I had the group compare their lists to a list of individual strengths researchers have found are particularly useful in overcoming adversity, individual protective factors that I call “personal 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.

The Resiliency Wheel



- **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. Saleeby, 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 -- Gives of self in service to others and/or a cause**
- Life Skills -- Uses life skills, including good decision-making, assertiveness, and impulse control**
- Humor -- Has a good sense of humor**
- Inner Direction -- Bases choices/decisions on internal evaluation**
- 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, or uses creative imagination, thinking or other processes.**

So you'd like to foster resiliency....?

Where should a counselor, teacher, parent, or other caring adult begin in making use of this information? Start wherever there is the greatest need and/or wherever it is possible to start. Often, one action will embody many resiliency-building elements. It is important to recognize there is not way to know just how many protective factors are needed by any one individual to assure a resilient outcome. Most resilient individuals who have been studied did not have protective factors present in all of their environments; some had only a few in just a few places. So, start wherever possible. Developing a Resiliency Chart for a child (and *it can also be adapted to use with adults, families, even organizations*) is a foundational step in becoming more effective at fostering resiliency.

The Resiliency Chart

For each particular child, draw a t-chart as shown below. On the left-hand side of the chart, list all the concerns--internal, in terms of the attitudes and behaviors of this child, and external, in terms of environmental risks and stressors--that you have about the child. Try to limit your list to a handful of the most pressing problems. On the right-hand side of the chart, list every positive you can think of both within this child and within his or her environment. Think in terms of attitudes, behaviors, personality characteristics, talents and potential talents, capabilities, and positive interests. Think also in terms of the child's environment: list every person, place, organization, or structure that provides positive interaction and support for this child. Referring to The Resiliency Wheel (above) and the List of Personal Resiliency Builders (above) can help with this strength-identification process. Don't limit your thinking, however, to these lists. Include anything you think of as a strength or positive support. One key question that helps to fully flush out all possible strengths is this: How does this person do as well as he or she does? (Higgins,1994). In other words, even though he or she has problems, what keeps those problems from being even more serious and numerous?

Child's Name _____	
Problems/Challenges	Strengths/Positive Supports

After filling out The Resiliency Chart, ask: What on the “Strengths” side of the chart can be used to intervene with current problems/challenges?

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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