

### *A Resource for Teens: Clip, Copy, and Use*

## **How to Become Resilient: You've Got the Power to Help Yourself Bounce Back...from Life!**

by Jami Jones, Ph.D.

Justin was stressed. It seemed his life was falling apart. At home it was tense. Money was tight. His parents were fighting. He had failed a few tests. Friends were on his case. "All in all," thought Justin, "life these days is a real struggle."

Justin's not alone. Many teens face challenges stemming from problems with friends, school, teachers, parents, and work. Although life is difficult at times, the good news it doesn't mean you have to be overwhelmed by these struggles. You can bounce back from them and become stronger and wiser in the process.

The word for this is **resiliency**. At Dictionary.com, resiliency is defined as "an occurrence of rebounding or springing back." A growing field of psychological research is documenting that everyone has the power to spring back from difficulties. Resiliency is like a rubber band that gets stretched almost to the breaking point. Instead of snapping, it is able to spring back into shape. One teen-ager described resiliency as "bouncing back from problems and stuff with more power and more smarts."

There are many studies that document resiliency in children and teens. One of the most significant is called the Kauai Longitudinal Study, which looked at all the children born in 1954 on the island of Kauai in Hawaii. These children were studied from birth until 50 years of age. The authors of this study, psychologists Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, identified children who were struggling with poverty, parental addictions and mental illness, divorce, health problems, and other significant issues. A lot of these children were doing well in spite of their difficulties. Most of them eventually bounced back from the negative impact of these problems.

Werner and Smith called these children resilient and they identified that resilient kids had **protective factors** that helped them handle their problems without becoming overwhelmed. These *protective factors* are available to you too.

What are these *protective factors* and how do you add them to your life?

1. **Making connections.** One of the most important *protective factors* is making connections with caring adults who will listen and help you put your problems into perspective. These important people are sometimes called mentors, and can be family members, teachers, coaches, counselors, ministers, neighbors—any adult you know who cares about kids.

It will be up to you to find a mentor. Tell this special person that you need him to help you with the challenges in your life. Keep in mind that a mentor will never ask you to do anything that is illegal or makes you feel uncomfortable. If this ever happens, tell another adult immediately!

2. **Reading.** Some teens think that the only kind of reading that counts is what you do in class. Wrong! The most important benefit of reading is to learn about things that are important to you. Reading is a skill that improves with practice and reading will most certainly help you get ahead in life. Read anything—books, websites, and magazines!

3. **Problem-solving and goal setting skills.** Some research shows that one factor that separates the resilient teens from the not-so-resilient ones is the ability to solve problems and set goals. Dr. Gregory J. Williams, a professor at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, developed a four-step technique called “I CAN” to help teens do this.
  - I Identify the problem. You need to understand the problem and its causes before a solution is possible. To determine the cause of the problem, ask “who, what, where, when, and how” questions. Ask your friends or mentor to help you.
  - C Can you name some solutions? Begin by brainstorming as many solutions as possible – no matter how far-fetched, silly, or wild they seem to you. At this step it is the number of solutions that counts, not quality!
  - A Analyze the solutions. How will they work? Now is the time to analyze solutions and discard the ones you think will not work.
  - N Now, pick one and use it! If it works, great! If not, try another one.
4. **Social skills.** When life seems to be falling apart it is important to have trusted friends to count on. Teens with good social skills are more likely to enlist the help of friends and adults during difficult times. To have friends, it is important to be a friend. Do you know the five most desirable qualities in a friend? Kids want to be friends with other kids who express a sense of humor, friendliness, helpfulness, frequent compliments, and offers to get together. Likewise, the qualities that are real turn-offs are verbal aggression, anger, dishonesty, being critical, and bossiness. Volunteering is one way to broaden your network of friends. The simple act of helping others lets you to put your problems into perspective, makes your community stronger, and is a great way to meet people and develop new interests. Go to the Do Something website at [www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org) to learn more.
5. **Hobbies and interests.** The research is clear that resilient teens have hobbies and interests they enjoy. It could be playing a sport or musical instrument, painting, reading, or writing poetry. Perhaps the greatest benefit is that when the going gets tough, hobbies/interests can help you forget for a time your problems and stress.

Life can often be difficult. The good news is that you are able to control how you respond to difficulties adding *protective factors* today so you will be more resilient tomorrow. Start now by *putting together your resiliency plan that includes these protective factors.*

- Make connections and find at least one mentor. Know when to ask for help.
- Use “I CAN” to solve problems and set goals.
- Read so you can make good decisions.
- Be a friend. Help someone whose problems are more serious than yours.
- Enrich your life with a hobby or interest.

Researchers Werner and Smith developed a simple way to define a resilient person. They say that a resilient person *loves well, works well, plays well, and expects well.* What they mean is that resilient people have some loving/caring relationships in their lives, are successfully working on a job or in school, have fun (play) utilizing hobbies and positive leisure-time interests, and expect a positive future for their lives. You can increase your resiliency by using the suggestions in this article. You can also learn more by going to [www.resiliency.com](http://www.resiliency.com).

*Jami L. Jones, Ph.D., is assistant professor in the Department of Library Science and Instructional Technology at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. After the death of her son's girlfriend, Dr. Jones became interested in studying the response of adults within her profession to strengthen and promote resiliency within youth. She is the author of Bouncing Back: Dealing with the Stuff Life Throws at You, a book for teens published in 2006. She also authored Helping Teens Cope: Resources for School Library Media Specialists and Other Youth Workers and can be contacted through her web site at [www.askdrjami.org](http://www.askdrjami.org).*

