



Modelling Resilience

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What is resilience?

Resilience and wellbeing are hot topics at the moment. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. It means 'bouncing back' from difficult experiences by practising the skills required to let you move through adversity, rather than becoming defined by it.

Resilience psychology is a new field of psychology. You may have seen the segment on the Sunday program on 29 May 2016 about Lucy Hone, a New Zealand resilience psychology expert. Lucy had to put her resiliency knowledge to the test when her family lost their daughter in a tragic accident. Lucy believes that what works to foster resilience in yourself is supportive relationships and physical nurturing. She also believes that it's best to let go of blame in order to move on.

Supportive relationships and physical strength are at the centre of resilience - they both help us feel more confident we can cope with adversity, and support us to recover when we are in the midst of it. Experiencing tragedy or stress gives you the evidence that you can, with the support of others, plough through adversity i.e. knowing you don't need to sweat the small stuff anymore. Price-Mitchell (2015) refers to the great African American educator Booker T. Washington, when over 100 years ago, he spoke about resilience:

"I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles overcome while trying to succeed."

Why be resilient?

By not practising resilience, i.e. by becoming overwhelmed by adversity and letting it define you and your worth, means a greater risk of using unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with life's challenges, such as aggression towards self or others (Cherry, 2015).

In contrast, people who practise resiliency do not let adversity define them or their worth, and this in turn fosters constructive behaviours. As Marano (2015) describes, these people find resilience

by moving towards a goal beyond themselves transcending pain and grief by perceiving bad times as a temporary state of affairs. In Lucy Hone's case it was focusing on living for her two teenage sons - this gave Lucy the will to just keep going in order to not lose what she still had to what she had already lost.

Resiliency factors

It takes time

In the moment, when you are in the midst of a stress response you may not feel particularly resilient. However, people generally adapt well over time to life-changing situations and stressful conditions. It involves resilience, an ongoing process that requires time and effort and engages people in taking a number of steps to practise resilience (APA, 2016).

Resilience is a skill, not a trait

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone (APA, 2016).

Resilience can help to resolve past trauma, you aren't stuck in the past

We all have traumas in our lives, times where we have felt out of control and shame as a result - we may not have learned to be resilient at the time but this doesn't mean it's too late to learn! We are just big children after all - and we have the choice to go back and reinterpret past events and respond actively and creatively. Once these constructive responses to adversity are repeated over time, they become incorporated into our inner selves as lasting strengths (Marano, 2015).

Resilience is quite ordinary, not extraordinary

Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience. One example is the response of many Canterbury residents to the Christchurch earthquakes.

Resilience goes with forgiveness, rather than shame or blame

Resiliency is fostered by constructive beliefs and behaviours about yourself and others, rather than shame and blame. Forgiveness fosters resilience, however forgiveness (of what you or another person has done) doesn't mean condoning the behaviour. It means that for your own wellbeing and resiliency, you choose to let go of anger towards yourself or the other person in order to focus on your own energy on constructive outlets.

Resilience doesn't eliminate emotional pain

Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn't experience difficulty or distress. People who practise resiliency understand that setbacks happen and that sometimes life is hard and painful. They still experience the emotional pain, grief, and sense of loss that comes after a tragedy, but their mental outlook allows them to work through such feelings and recover (Cherry, 2015).

There is not one recipe for creating and practising resilience

Developing resilience is a personal journey. People do not all react the same to traumatic and stressful life events, therefore slightly different skills and strategies and resources might be required to meet your needs. You are you, you will respond to and need different things to others in times of stress. The important thing is being aware of how you feel and what you need.

You only have some influence on your child's resiliency

You can only do your best to model resiliency to your child, ultimately it's up to them. They will learn (if they are ready, willing and able) that they are important, able and enabled to triumph over adversity. This comes from practice and experience in learning from the tough times.

Characteristics of resilience

Some of the common characteristics of resiliency include:

- Having supportive people around you, and actively asking for support.
- Seeing yourself as working through difficulties, rather than being a victim to them.
- Knowing when to pull back and let go of trying, and trying.
- Believing you are as worthy as anyone else, just because you are you.
- Knowing you are able to problem solve when the time comes.
- Not blaming yourself or others, when things don't go quite right. This might look like externalising the not so good things, and internalising successes by taking responsibility for what goes right.
- Self- reflective - being aware of how you feel and what you need.
- Communicating your needs in constructive ways.
- Responding constructively to strong feelings and impulses.
- The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out.
- Feeling like you have choice in adversity, rather than no control, even if it's just being able to breathe.

10 ways to practise resilience

1. REFRAME - see your own and others' mistakes as opportunities for learning, rather than evidence to feel guilty. Learn from your recent, and not so recent past. What was your greatest frustration as a child? How did you behave as a result? What would have helped you in those times? How do you replay these frustrations and behaviours in your life? What do you need to help you now?
2. See factors outside of your control as situational difficulties, rather than personal failure. Accept that some things are out of your control/expertise and allow yourself to step back, delegate, delay or discard them.
3. See difficult times as temporary, rather than permanent. Seeing obstacles as hard and surmountable, rather than insurmountable. Like imagining bushes of gorse on your life journey, rather than a solid brick wall.
4. See feelings as data for doing something constructive (which may be doing nothing at all), rather than running from them, fighting them, or wallowing in them.
5. Seeing tasks or experiences that are difficult for you as being opportunities to learn new skills (that you may never have been taught), rather than seeing yourself as weak, deficient, or there being something 'wrong' with you.
6. See yourself as the maker of your life, rather than the subject of it, give yourself projects in the following areas: social, intellectual, psychological, emotional/spiritual, physical. Make sure they are in line with the capacity you have.

7. Express how you feel and ask for what you need, this means reaching out to others rather than being afraid of judgement. Say 'No' if you don't have the capacity to give to others - make sure your tank is full first. If you have a child, this may involve asking someone else to step in, even hiring a post-natal doula.
8. RELATIONSHIPS - Have supportive people in your life, people that love you unconditionally, or with new relationships, at least show potential for it. Even if its via phone or Skype, great relationships are to be cherished, even if they're long distance. If someone isn't in a position to support you, then work on it (if they're willing) or look elsewhere.
9. See fear as something for you to face (slowly, quietly, gently and with the help of a professional may be useful).
10. Responding to your body - if it needs to move, move it, if it needs to rest, rest it, if it needs to release energy, then release it (in a safe way, like yelling into a pillow). Make sure you BREATHE deeply into your tummy, and practice other exercises that help you switch off and be calm.

How to model resilience to your children

Learning resilience starts early. As Price-Mitchell (2015) contends, children who develop resilience are better able to face disappointment, learn from failure, cope with loss, and adapt to change. Characteristics of resilience in our children include ability to express how they feel and ask for what they want, their determination and perseverance to tackle problems, and ability to problem solve and see ways through the challenges of school and life.

For children, resilience is derived from the ways they learn to think and act when they are faced with obstacles. This requires good modelling of resilience by their supportive relationships with parents, teachers, and other caring adults. These relationships become sources of strength when children work through stressful situations and painful emotions. We can help our children realise they CAN cope with challenges, they CAN ask for help, they CAN try again or try something different.

The essence to teaching resilience is gifting our children with the self-belief they they will cope if something not so good happens, with our support — rather than being afraid of things not going as they plan. Most importantly:

'We can teach our children to believe in themselves, their ability to negotiate their way around obstacles, and to see their importance in this world' (Price-Mitchell, 2015).

Five ways to model resilience to your children

1. Practice being resilient yourself, first and foremost, and be ok when you're not feeling or behaving particularly resilient - it's a journey that takes time, remember. There will always new obstacles to practise with! Take time to look after yourself, so you're well equipped to deal with the challenges of parenting.
2. Talk to your kids about what skills and experience they learned from difficult situations, how they felt, what helped them, what made things worse, and what they might do differently next time.

3. Teach your child to approach difficult tasks as opportunities for learning, rather than pressure to perform perfectly or achieve certain grades or rewards. Praise your child for trying their best, and trying again if that's something they still want to pursue.
4. Teach your child to focus on what's important to them and the value in the task for the child personally. This helps your child focus on their own destiny and their role in that - this is ground on which to teach your child to negotiate with others to get to where they want to be.
5. Practice reflective listening with your child - simply reflecting back what they say, with a tone of empathy in your voice. Teach the formula: SAY how you feel, ASK for what you want, REQUEST help if you need it.

Just three things to remember:

Psychologist Edith Grotberg, Ph.D., (cited Marano, 2015) believes that everyone needs reminders of the strengths they have. She urges people to cultivate resilience by thinking along three lines:

1. RELATIONSHIPS

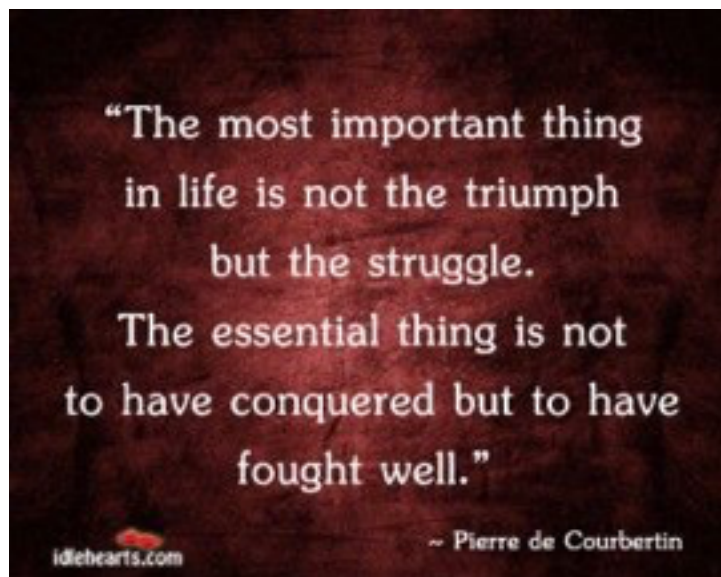
I Have: strong relationships, structure, rules at home, role models; these are external supports that are provided

2. SELF-WORTH

I Am: a person who has hope and faith, cares about others, is proud of myself; these are inner strengths that can be developed

3. ABILITY

I Can: communicate, solve problems, gauge the temperament of others, seek good relationships— all interpersonal and problem-solving skills that are acquired.



What next?

If you want impartial, confidential and professional support while you learn, practice and model resilience then PND Wellington has Counsellors to help you on this journey. Our fees range from free to low-cost depending on the level of experience of the Counsellor.

I'm Emma Heaney-Yeatts, the Lead Counsellor at PND Wellington. I have two young boys and my own experience with postnatal distress. I'm a qualified counsellor and full member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. I see clients in Johnsonville and Mana.

If you want to find out more, contact us using the details below:

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