

Developing Resilient Relationships

“Many studies show that the primary factor in resilience is having caring and supportive relationships within and outside the family. Relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance, help bolster a person’s resilience.”

– AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION



Why do resilient relationships matter?

From a biological and social perspective, humans are pack animals. We have evolved to rely on strong relational support systems to grow and survive. Relationships help to reduce anxiety and stress, reminding us that we do not have to face our challenges alone.

What kinds of support do resilient relationships offer?

Emotional support – Connecting with others can help to contextualize or reduce the negative emotions we feel. These relationships also help to magnify positive emotions we experience through cooperation.

Cognitive support – Individuals or groups we share relationships with can help to organize our thoughts. Seeking the counsel of a loved one in making plans and decisions can offer new perspectives we may not have previously considered.

Instrumental support – Many hands make light work. Utilizing the help of others in running errands or assistance in performing tasks can strengthen bonds and reduce the burden of cumbersome activities.

Tools & tips for building resilient relationships

Remember – Quality over Quantity!

Family members, neighbors, coworkers, and teammates, as well as religious, ethnic, and regional communities, can be excellent sources of strong support systems. It is important to note that fewer, more intimate relationships offer stronger individual support than many, less personal ones.

Validating feelings

Disagreements can arise in even the strongest relationships. Even if we are not seeing eye to eye with our loved ones, practicing validation can be instrumental in strengthening relationships through conflict. Validation is practiced by letting a loved one know that you hear what they are saying, and that you understand their perspective (even if you don’t agree with it!). Validation keeps conversations open and honest.

Reciprocity

Strong, resilient relationships are reciprocal, in that you should expect the work that you put into a relationship to be reflected in that individual. If it feels like a relationship is becoming one-sided, having a constructive conversation to express these feelings can communicate desires and develop expectations for the relationship. If someone is not willing to meet you halfway, it might be helpful to find someone else who will.

Find balance in social and alone time

All relationships need nurturing, but they also need time to rest. Practicing the development of appropriate boundaries with those we love can give everyone time alone to rest and recuperate. Finding the balance between the time you give to others, and the time you give to yourself, is key in making a relationship resilient.

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Things to consider when thinking about resilient relationships

Trauma

Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of trauma, while power and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery. The development, nurturing, and maintenance of intimate and attached relationships are key components in helping to recover from traumatic stress.

Research on high social support

Studies indicate that individuals who have strong interpersonal support systems:

Live longer – Those with strong relationships are 50% less likely to die prematurely. Similarly, committing to a life partner can add three years to your life.

Deal with stress more effectively – A study conducted with over 100 people found that after completing stressful tasks, individuals experienced a faster recovery when they were reminded of people with whom they have a strong relationship.

Are healthier – College students with strong friendships were half as likely to catch the common cold when they were exposed to the virus. Conversely, studies in older adults found isolation to be a significant predictor of poor health outcomes.

Feel richer – A survey found that doubling the number of friendships you have has the same effect on your well-being as receiving a 50% increase in income.

What were you taught about asking for help?

Our experiences with individuals, groups, and environments shape our likelihood of approaching others for help. Consider factors in your life that may have encouraged or inhibited your ability to reach others in times of need, such as:

Culture – Is it a socially accepted norm to ask for help? Have you been conditioned to solve your problems on your own due to societal pressure?

Parental figures – Was seeking help encouraged by your parents or guardians? Do you have memories of them asking one another or others for help?

Gender – Do you feel restricted or enabled by gender roles when considering asking for assistance?

Life experiences – Based on your personal awareness, do you consider it to be difficult or easy to approach others for help given your individual codes and credos?

RESOURCES

Resilience: Relationships

www.mentalhelp.net/relationships/resilience

Esther Perel: How Can We Develop Resilience in Our Relationships?

52-minute podcast

www.npr.org/2020/09/11/911398921/esther-perel-how-can-we-develop-resilience-in-our-relationships

Mindful Movements: Finding Resilience in Relationships

| Steve Wilson | TEDxLangleyED
18-minute TedTalk Video

www.ted.com/talks/steve_wilson_mindful_movements_finding_resilience_in_relationships

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Information courtesy of Voices Center for Resilience

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