Stephen Lassen, PhD

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Calm in the Eye of the Storm: Becoming More Resilient

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What is resilience?

• “The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness”
• “The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress.”
The beginnings of resilience

- Norman Garmezy
- Schizophrenia: some patients with schizophrenia could barely function, others did better
- Children whose parents had schizophrenia: Many demonstrated good functioning across settings
- “Invulnerables”
- Continued study of children who showed positive adaptation to stressful situations and poverty
- “Protective factors”
Why resilience?

- 50% of NICU nurses report significant symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress
- 12% of NICU nurses report high levels of anxiety symptoms
- 69% of NICU nurses report feeling emotionally exhausted
- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US
- 32.8% of US adults experienced increased depressive symptoms in 2021 (27.8% in 2020, 8.5% pre-COVID)
Why resilience?

• Cigna Resilience Index (2020):
  • 37% of adults have high resilience
  • 32% report almost never having workplace discussions about impact of COVID-19 on them, their families and their mental health

• Stress in America Survey (2020):
  • 19% of adults say their mental health is worse now than last year
  • 67% reported experiencing increased stress over the course of the pandemic
Myths about resilience:

- Resilience is an inherent, unmodifiable trait
- Resilience is nothing more than good stress management
- Resilient people are immune to stressors and adversity
- Resilience is just positive thinking
- Resilient people are always happy and don’t have bad days
Optimism

• How to define optimism?
• Optimistic people are healthier, happier and live longer
• 20% born optimistic
Cultivating optimism

- Seeing things as temporary vs. permanent
- Avoiding the words “always” and “never”
  - “I’ll always be sad”
  - “I’m sad right now”
  - “I never follow through with my goals”
  - “I don’t follow through with my goals when I’m not motivated”
- Even when things are permanent, the way we feel about them can change
Focus on the right things
Focus on the right things

- Ellen Langer’s “counterclockwise” study (1979)
- 8 men in their 70’s
- Lived for 1 week as though it was 1959
- Baseline assessments of health, cognition and physical strength all improved
- “Selective abstraction” (Beck)
Focus on the right things

- Expressing gratitude
- Gratitude consistently shown to be associated with improved health, psychological and social outcomes
- Gratitude journaling
- Emmons and McCullough research
• Natural to want to avoid discussing and processing difficult things
• Research suggests benefits to allowing ourselves to release/express difficult feelings
• Expressive writing interventions (Pennebaker, 1997)
• Individuals directed to write about a difficult or traumatic event for 15-20 minutes over 3-5 sessions
• Consistent benefits (short and long-term) on measures of health and well-being
Connecting with others

- Socially connected individuals are healthier and happier
- Benefits are accrued even with just 1 supportive person
Be present

“The shadow by my finger cast
Divides the future from the past:
Before it, sleeps the unborn hour
In darkness, and beyond thy power:
Behind its unreturning line,
The vanished hour, no longer thine:
One hour alone is in thy hands,—
The NOW on which the shadow stands.”
Mindfulness

• “Paying attention; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

• Research on mindfulness has consistently demonstrated benefits on psychological and physical health, improved work performance

• Mindfulness training in nursing
Let’s practice!
• Cultivate optimism
  • Temporary vs. permanent
  • Avoid “always” and “never”

• Focus on the right things
  • Express gratitude

• Process difficult emotions/events
  • Write about what’s bothering you

• Connect with others

• Be present
  • Practice mindfulness
Resiliency resources

• Positive psychology (happierhuman.com)
• “Wherever You Go There You Are” (Jon Kabat-Zinn)
• “Learned Optimism” (Martin Seligman)
• “Man’s Search for Meaning” (Viktor Frankl)
• Institutional Wellness Programs
• Turning Point in Kansas City
• Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; edinstruments.com)
• Resilience podcasts
Thank You!

Questions?

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