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The Resilience Identification Resources project: a strengths based approach to protective and risk factors.

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About the Resilience Identification Resources project

Funding for the Resilience Identification Resources project was given to the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, through the Better Futures project and the New South Wales Department of Community Services (DoCS). The objective of the project was to develop resources that could be used by non-health professionals (e.g. youth and social workers, teachers) to identify risk and protective factors in a young person's life and to develop pathways of support for him/her.

The resources underwent development through a series of trials. Agencies and services involved in the trials were Australia wide and included:

- Primary and high schools
- Church based welfare services
- Multicultural and refugee services
- Aboriginal services
- Accommodation services

The project's approach to the development of the resilience identification resources was governed by several key points:

- Resilience is a dynamic process
- Risk and protective factors can be modified and enhanced
- A social-ecological approach to human behaviour and interactions is useful
- A strengths based approach was adopted

The resources developed were:

- **Resilience Identification Checklist** The Resilience Checklist will assist practitioners and teachers working with young people to identify risk and protective factors in a young person's life. The Resilience Checklist can be used by individual workers or teams to ensure a holistic approach to a young person and his/her situation. Through the Checklist it is possible to plan and draw on a variety of resources to address the risk factors and increase the protective factors, in order to enhance the resilience of the young person. The Checklist covers the major areas associated with risk and protective factors and is divided into External factors; Internal factors and Interpersonal skills. Users are required to consider a range of variables within each factor.

- **The Resilience Circle** The Resilience Circle has been designed for use with young people between the ages of 9 and 16 years. It may be used in group work or in individual counselling sessions. The young person is encouraged to draw or write their responses to the different segments in the Circle. The Resilience Circle is in A4 format and it is possible to enlarge the Circle to A3 if the young person requires more space in which to draw or write.

Theoretical rationale for the project.

Resilience is a dynamic process.

The term resilience is not new and has been described and discussed by many. Much discussion has centred on whether resilience is:

- an outcome - achieving relative mental well-being in the face of adversity and risk
- a process - adaptive processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources to adjust to and cope with adversity.

While there is still much discussion surrounding the theoretical positioning of resilience of more immediate importance to practitioners is the practical application of resilience theory.

The definition of resilience used by the Resilience Identification Resources project conceptualized resilience as a dynamic process and as such subject to promotion or diminution by human agency. A definition of resilience can therefore be:

The process of, capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990).

Use of such a definition helps practitioners begin to understand how a young person who has experienced difficult circumstances or a severe trauma can *get over it* and *get on* with his/her life. It also provides an insight into how people cope with wars and others tragedies and yet still find ways to lead productive lives. To describe such people as resilient is not to deny the severity of the circumstances they have experienced nor the possible short or long term emotional consequences of such events. Rather it allows researchers to ask, “*What characteristics helped these people to cope? How did they bounce back from adversity?*”

The key in the above definition is in *adaptation*. This acknowledges that there are behaviours and characteristics which will help an individual adapt or change according to circumstances. Such behaviours may either impede or promote the development of resilience. Viewing resilience as a process also allows for consideration of the environment or culture within which the adverse circumstance is occurring. It also accounts for the cross cultural findings regarding resilience.

The International Resilience Project collected data from 30 countries and concluded that resilience was *a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome damaging effects of adversity* (Grotberg,1996). While different cultures tended to emphasize different approaches to promoting resilience, there was a similar range of factors

associated with the promotion of resilience. Grotberg (1996) concluded that resilience as a concept crosses national and cultural boundaries. As such behaviours and factors that either increase or decrease an individual's resilience can be identified.

Protective and Risk factors can be enhanced and modified respectively

Behaviours and characteristics that either promote or diminish resilience have been described as protective and risk factors.

- **Risk factors** are generally acknowledged as increasing the likelihood of difficulties in life and experiencing poor health and wellbeing.
- **Protective factors** are seen as enhancing life opportunities and promoting good health and wellbeing. They can reduce the impact of unavoidable negative events and help young people resist risk-taking behaviours.

The understanding of resilience development and the associated risk and protective factors has undergone several conceptual changes over the years. Resilience was initially seen as occurring across the three broad areas namely: individuals, their families and the societies in which they live (Garmezy, 1991; Werner, 1995). This view has expanded to account for risk and protective factors interacting across levels (within the individual, between individuals, family, home, and community) and across environments.

Researchers are increasingly coming to view resilience as multifactorial (ie having many variables or factors which influence the process and development of resilience) and multidimensional (occurring in different environments and at different levels for each individual) (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Olsson, et. al, 2003). Consequently the identification of risk and protective factors can be seen as taking place within frameworks which allow for interaction of factors, allow for individual differences in contexts (environments) and individual differences in development. Even factors previously seen as of primary importance (e.g. poverty levels, intelligence levels, mental health issues) are increasingly viewed as being moderated by the context of the adverse event and the personal characteristics of the individual. Such frameworks are able to account for individual variations in responses to adversity across cultures, ages, gender etc by viewing an individual's transactions as dynamic and as taking place with regard to personal and environmental characteristics.

This has led to research into internal or personal variables (biological, physical, emotional) and external or environmental/social variables (eg level of income, family structure, community connections, nature of the society) and the interactions between the two. Moos (2002) argues that social environments should be placed in context and that conditions in one setting can alter the nature and influence of other settings. Consequently social environment influences may be in a positive or negative direction. For example a young person in trouble at school is likely to experience the effect (consequences) in his/her home setting, however the direction of the effect will be conditional on the characteristics of the home. Additionally social contexts for an individual may be stable or transitory. Therefore investigating characteristics such as social integration, commonly held beliefs, and community resources and services should be explored as part of the resilience development process.

The impact of external variables on an individual will vary according to the internal characteristics of that individual. For example what may seem a major problem for one individual within a social/environmental context, may be more easily overcome by another individual. Similarly there is the phenomenon of people who experience positive outcomes and maturation after a life crisis (Moos, 2002). Examining and highlighting positive behaviours and adaptations occurring during or after a personal, family or community crisis (ie adopting a strengths perspective) is increasingly regarded as fruitful and worthwhile.

Models of resilience

Holistic approaches to models of resilience have been promoted by several researchers (Henderson, & Milstein, 1996; Benard, 1995; Myers et al, 2000;). The use of a circle or wheel to conceptualise resilience and its accompanying risk and protective factors has enabled exploration of a variety of human and environmental characteristics and provides a graphic representation of the interaction of those characteristics. Such models also focus on the strengths in an individual's story that may be characterised by problems. By focussing on the strengths (both personal and environmental) of a situation it is possible to *re-story* problems, expanding on the ways in which an individual can use those strengths to deal with current or future difficulties.

This allows for investigation of the adaptive behaviours and thought processes that enable a person to make use of internal and external resources to adjust to and cope with adversity (Daniel & Wassell, 2003). Focusing on the processes that promote good outcomes for children and young people means that resilient children could be seen as better equipped to cope with change and uncertainty and to recover faster and more completely from traumatic events or circumstances (Newman and Blackburn, 2002). The notion of children and young people becoming *better equipped* allows for investigation of *how* factors contribute to positive outcomes for individuals in response to changing life circumstances.

The social – ecological model

In order to fully investigate and identify how risk and protective factors impact on a young person, it is necessary to acknowledge the impact of biological as well as social factors, and the effects of interactions between the two. After reviewing current resilience research Infante (2000) argued that in order to understand the role of biological factors in protecting an individual it is necessary to study the levels of environment that surround an individual. Bronfenbrenner proposed a social-ecological model. In this model the individual is viewed as being at the centre of many social layers that include family, school, cultural and social circumstances. The model allows for the effects of interactions between the layers and accounts for cultural and individual differences in an individual's response to adverse circumstances. The layers are:

- The individual – sex, age, health, etc
- Microsystem – family, schools, neighbourhood, peers
- Mesosystem – interrelationships between settings in which the individual actively participates
- Exosystem – extended family, neighbours, social welfare services, media
- Macrosystem – attitudes and ideologies of the culture

Placing the individual at the centre of the model is crucial. Luthar, et. al. (2000) and Rigsby (1994) argue that positive adaptation for an individual must be measured according to culturally specific indicators. Consequently, Grotberg and other strength based researchers assert that the individual is best placed to make an assessment of the extent of his/her resilience and the impact of risk and protective factors upon him or her self. The importance of the individual as an agent of change cannot be underestimated and designing interventions that consult and fully collaborate with the individual are crucial.

A strengths approach to interventions

A strengths perspective advocates focussing on what is working well within an individual's life. The strengths or protective factors in a young person's life are seen as the building blocks of resilience and can be drawn on to bring about change. The process of exploring and identifying the protective factors and individual strengths will assist the individual to become more aware of their own abilities and resources to increase their self-reliance and self-help skills when they encounter another adverse situation.

When considering the application of a strengths perspective and resilience theory to real world interventions it is feasible to think of the process of resilience as able to be mapped. The Resilience Identification Resources are designed to facilitate such mapping. As such risk and protective factors both within an individual (internal factors) and in the environment (external factors) need to be accounted for. While the risk factors in an individual's life should never be underestimated and society has a continued mandate to address the problems that people (and young people in particular) face, researchers are acknowledging the benefit of a focus on an individual's strengths and protective factors within difficult circumstances (Benard, 1995; Henderson & Milstein, 1996).

An Australian review of adolescent resilience (Olsson, 2003) raised the notion of exponential risk and protective factors. If resilience is viewed as a multi-factorial concept then the opportunity for risk factors to interact will increase exponentially the effect of those risk factors. Therefore it is possible that increasing the number of protective factors will increase the probability, possibly exponentially, of positive outcomes for an individual (Werner and Smith, 1992). Such a notion has implications for successful interventions.

A strengths approach recognises that there are positive personal and environmental characteristics that can be utilised to help support an individual and looks to draw on the positive characteristics (the strengths). While both 'risk' and 'protective' factors may be acquired throughout a young person's development, it is feasible to draw on protective factors in encouraging the development of resilience in response to adversity.

A strengths approach also avoids defining the young person as 'the problem' i.e. it advocates that practitioners join with the young person to explore together where and how the difficulty/problem is impacting on the young person's life. By looking at the environmental and social contexts of a young person it is possible to work on reducing risk factors while promoting protective factors. Any intervention or treatment, therefore, should help a young person to:

- connect with their social environments – family (immediate or extended), school and/or work
- experience caring positive adult role models
- create opportunities to participate in activities around them.

However any or all of the above may involve some skill development. The International Resilience Project (Grotberg, 1996) found that once behaviours had been defined as promoting or inhibiting resilience, the behaviours and factors associated with promoting resilience could be grouped as follows:

- external factors
- internal factors
- skills

This became the basis for the development of the Resilience Resources. By looking at the different contextual and individual aspects that influence the promotion of possible protective mechanisms it is possible to account for variations in responses to adversity and also to implement effective strategies at different levels within the system.

“(Such a view of) resilience allows for a new epistemology of human development, which stresses human potentials and assets, is culturally specific and appeals to collective responsibility, so the promotion of human well-being can be addressed in a collective and multidisciplinary way...

resilience as process...becomes a social/political responsibility. As such resilience can be fostered with the participation of parents, researchers, practitioners, social services, politicians and the community”

(Infante, 2001)

In summary

The Resilience Identification Resources aim to encourage the acknowledgment and exploration of the multiple contexts in which young people exist today. The resources acknowledge the biological, social and emotional factors influencing young people today. Development of resilience is a community responsibility, and encompasses family, school, recreation and work environments. Given that risk and protective factors operate across settings and at different levels in differing environments, dealing with issues concerning young people today therefore requires a systemic and dynamic approach. The Resilience Identification Resources have been designed to assist in the facilitation of partnerships and the development of cooperative practices between the institutions and personnel involved in a young person’s life.

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