

Essential Skills for Disasters: Resilience and Self-Care

by Deborah Hopper, Ph.D.

RESILIENCE

The APA “Resilience” campaigns began after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when it became apparent that the general public was looking for ways in which they could build resilience “in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or...significant sources of stress.” (American Psychological Association; <https://apa.org>). APA partnered with the Discovery Health Channel to create a documentary, as well as a resource tool kit for psychologists to take into their communities and hold resilience-building forums for the public. Resilience is taught by disaster mental health psychologists and clinicians during American Red Cross volunteer trainings. As therapists, we can apply the principles to ourselves, model, and disseminate these skills to our patients. With our country’s ongoing tragic natural and man-made disasters, continued involvement in war, and recent threats of international nuclear war, the need for building our own and others’ resilience remains vital.

Resilience, i.e., "bouncing back" from adversity and difficult experiences is a quality present in most people. However, resilience is not a static trait, but rather, a range of “behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed.” Resilience helps any individual in their life generally, and is important for any psychologist or behavioral health clinician to cultivate because of the work we do, especially when we treat patients who have experienced trauma. As a result of facing our own life’s challenges and vicariously, those of our patients, over time many of us learn the necessity of strengthening our ability to adapt well. The purpose of this article is to make you aware of the professional resources that you can review in order to build your personal resilience over time. Building resilience may be considered a vital part of our well-being; taking care of ourselves has to be our first priority, as we provide care to others in both our personal and professional lives.

The APA website has a comprehensive document entitled, “*The Road to Resilience*” that also has a printable format. It covers component areas of resilience, such as factors, strategies, ways to build resilience, learning from your past, staying flexible, and so forth. Although resilience may be built by a combination of factors, research demonstrates that the primary contributing factor is the presence of caring, supportive relationships within and outside the family. Resilience is bolstered by relationships that create love and trust, provide role models, and offer encouragement and reassurance.

The APA has identified ten ways to build resilience, with a sample action step for each:

1. Make connections with others – accept help and support from those who care about you.
2. Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems – change how you interpret and respond to highly stressful events
3. Accept that change is part of living – if certain goals are no longer attainable, accept this and focus on circumstances you can alter
4. Move toward your goals – develop realistic goals and ask yourself “What’s one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”
5. Take decisive actions – act on difficult situations as much as you can, instead of detaching from problems and wishing they would go away.
6. Look for opportunities for self-discovery – seek to learn something about yourself as a result of coping with an adverse situation; many find they’ve grown in some respect
7. Nurture a positive view of yourself – develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and trust your instincts.
8. Keep things in perspective – even when facing painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective.
9. Maintain a hopeful outlook – expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want rather than worrying about what you fear.
10. Take care of yourself – pay attention to your own needs and feelings (also see self-care section, below)

Additional ways of strengthening resilience include journaling, meditation, and spiritual practices as ways some people build connections and restore hope.

SELF-CARE

You will notice that “taking care of yourself” is number 10 on the list of ways to build resilience. For behavioral health providers, there are specific tools and strategies to consider implementing, as our field uniquely impacts each one of us. For those of you who are members of the APA Practice Organization, see “*An Action Plan for Self-Care*,” and additional research-based, in-depth articles on self-care.

In 2016, APA published an article on “Seeking More Balance”, which offers these strategies:

1. Practice mindfulness: “...Develop a reflective habit of checking in with ourselves at least a couple times a day, taking note of the emotional ‘weather’ without judgment.”
2. Look for silver linings: when working adults--especially women--looked for benefit in negative situations, “they experienced fewer negative psychological effects from work-family conflict.”

3. Draw from positive psychology: “Positive emotions...broaden cognitive, attentional and behavioral repertoires...which boosts resilience and facilitates well-being.”
4. Take advantage of social support: seeking support from others is critical to well-being
5. Seek out good supervisors: sympathetic bosses can be helpful by buffering stress
6. Get moving: exercise boosts mood in the short term, and “can improve symptoms of depression, anxiety, addictive disorders and cognitive decline” in the long term.
7. Go outside: time spent in nature is linked to improved cognition, attention, mood and subjective well-being, as well as reducing symptoms of stress and depression
8. Make your life meaningful: “We do our best work and live our best lives when we have a sense of meaning – a feeling that what we do extends beyond us and brings good to others.”

Of course, no information about resilience or self-care is useful unless we apply it. Perhaps in your professional resilience journey you have learned the necessity of self-care and are doing a good job of it, but if you haven't started addressing some of the important components mentioned above, please consider a way to encourage yourself to make enhancing both resilience and self-care a continuing priority over time.

I sincerely hope this article has underscored the need for building your own resilience and has inspired you to try and new strategy to enhance your continuing efforts to build resilience and practice self-care.

Links to documents referenced in the article:

1. An introduction to the APA's Resilience campaign: <http://www.apa.org/practice/programs/campaign/resilience.aspx>
2. *The Road to Resilience* (APA): <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>; *en español*: <http://www.apa.org/centrodeapoyo/resiliencia-camino.aspx>
3. *Tips for Self-Care* (APA Practice Central): <http://www.apapracticecentral.org/ce/self-care/acca-promoting.aspx>