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Walsh, F. (1998). *Strengthening family resilience*. The Guilford Press.

Chapter 1

A family resilience approach aims to identify and fortify key interactional processes that enable families to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges. A resilience lens shifts perspective from viewing distressed families as damaged to seeing them as challenged, affirming their potentials for repair and growth. This approach is based on the conviction that both individual and family strength can be forged through collaborative efforts to deal with sudden crisis or prolonged adversity.

A family resilience framework fundamentally alters traditional deficit-based approaches to research and practice. Instead of focusing on how families have failed, we can direct our attention to how they can succeed. Rather than giving up on troubled families and salvaging individual survivors, we can draw out the best in families, building on key processes to encourage both individual and family growth.

Resilience can be defined as the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful. It is an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge.

The qualities of resilience enable people to heal from painful wounds, take charge of their lives, and go on live fully and love well.

Individual resilience is increasingly seen as an interaction between nature and nurture, encouraged by supportive relationships.

As researchers have discovered, resilience is forged through adversity, not despite it. Life crisis and hardship can bring out the best in us as we rise to the challenges.

The Chinese symbol for the word ‘crisis’ is a composite of two pictographs: the symbols for ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity.’ Although we would not wish for misfortune, the paradox of resilience is that our worst times can also become our best.

Easygoing temperament and a higher intelligence are helpful in building resilience. Such qualities tend to elicit more positive responses from others and to facilitate

coping strategies and problem-solving skills. More significant is a high level of self-esteem, characterized by a realistic sense of hope and personal control.

Kobasa and colleagues found that persons with hardy personalities possess three general characteristics: (1) the belief that they can control or influence events in their experience; (2) an ability to feel deeply involved in or committed to the activities in their lives; and anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development.

The term 'family resilience' refers to coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit. A systems perspective enables us to understand how family processes mediate stress and enable families to surmount crisis weather prolonged hardship.

Beyond the myths of the 'normal' family

Views of normality and health are socially constructed, influencing clinical assessment and goals for healthy family functioning. The vision of a so-called 'normal' family is largely in the eye of the beholder, filtered by professional values, personal family experience, and cultural standards.

Myth 1 – healthy families are problem-free. This belief has tended to pathologize ordinary families attempting to cope with the stresses and disruptive changes that are part of life. What distinguishes healthy families is not the absence of problems, but rather their coping and problem-solving abilities.

Myth 2 – the idealized 'traditional family' is the only possible model for a healthy family. Indeed, families of varied configurations can be successful. It is not family form, but rather family processes, that matter most for healthy functioning and resilience.

The skewed perspective on family dysfunction that long dominated the clinical field has begun to be rebalanced in recent years, as systems-based family therapists have shifted focus to a competence-based, strength-oriented paradigm. A family resilience approach builds on these developments, enabling us to shift from seeing families as damaged to understanding how they are challenged by adversity. It also corrects the faulty assumption that family health can only be found in a mythologized ideal model. Instead, this approach seeks to understand how all families, in their diversity, can survive and regenerate even with overwhelming stress. It affirms the family potential for self-repair and growth out of crisis and challenge.

A family resilience framework can serve as a valuable conceptual map in orienting a

wide range of human services. A systemic view of resilience is important in all efforts to help individuals, couples, and families to cope and adapt through crisis and adversity. The family has been a neglected resource in interventions aiming to foster resilience in children and adults. A narrow focus on individual resilience has led clinicians to attempt to salvage individual survivors without exploring their families' potential, and even to write off many families as hopeless. A clinical stance is called for that fosters a compassionate understanding of parental life challenges, encourages reconciliation, and searches for unrecognized strengths in the network of family relationships.

A family resilience approach provides a positive and pragmatic frame that guides interventions to strengthen the family as presenting problems are resolved. This approach goes beyond problem solving to problem prevention; it not only repairs families, but also prepares them to meet future challenges. A particular solution to a presenting problem may not be relevant to future problems, but the promotion of resilient processes can prepare families to surmount unforeseen problems and to avert crisis. In these ways, every intervention is also a preventive measure.

Basic principles grounded in systems theory serve as the foundations for a family resilience approach:

- Individual hardiness is best understood and fostered in the context of the family and larger social world, as a mutual interaction of individual, family, and environmental processes.
- Crisis events and persistent stresses affect the entire family and all its members, posing risks not only for individual dysfunction, but for relational conflict and family breakdown.
- Family processes mediate the impact of stress on all members and their relationships:
 - Protective processes foster resilience by buffering stress and promoting recovery.
 - Maladaptive responses heighten vulnerability and risks for individual and relationship distress.
- Family processes can influence the course of many crisis events.
- All families have potential for resilience; we can maximize that potential by encouraging their best efforts and strengthening key processes.

Thus, the same stressors can lead to different outcomes, depending on how a family meets its challenges. A core conviction in a family resilience approach is that there are strong advantages to family members' working collaboratively on finding solutions to

shared problems.

Chapter 6

Key processes in family resilience

Belief systems

Making meaning of adversity

- affiliative value: resilience as relationally based
- family life cycle orientation: normalizing, contextualizing adversity and distress
- sense of coherence: crisis as meaningful, comprehensive, manageable challenge
- appraisal of crisis, distress, and recovery: facilitative versus constraining beliefs

Positive outlook

- active initiative perseverance
- courage and en-courage-ment
- sustaining hope, optimistic view; confidence in overcoming odds
- focusing on strengths and potential
- mastering the possible; accepting what can't be changed

Transcendence and spirituality

- larger values, purpose
- spirituality: faith, communion, rituals
- inspiration; envisioning new possibilities; creativity; heroes
- transformation: learning and growth from adversity

Organizational patterns

Flexibility

- capacity to change: rebounding, reorganizing, adapting to fit challenges over time
- counterbalancing by stability: continuity, dependability through disruption

Connectedness

- mutual support, collaboration, and commitment
- respect for individual needs, differences, and boundaries
- strong leadership: nurturing, protecting, guiding children and vulnerable members
 - varied family forms: cooperative parenting / caregiving teams
 - couple / coparent relationship: equal partners
- seeking reconnection, reconciliation of troubled relationships

Social and economic resources

- mobilizing extended kin and social support; community networks
- building financial security; balancing work and family strains

Communication processes

Clarity

- clear, consistent messages (words and actions)
- clarification of ambiguous situation: truth seeking/ truth speaking

Open emotional expression

- sharing range of feelings (joy and pain; hopes and fears)
- mutual empathy; tolerance for differences
- responsibility for own feelings, behavior; avoiding blaming
- pleasurable interactions; humor

Collaborative problem solving

- Creative brainstorming; resourcefulness
- Shared decision making: negotiation, fairness, reciprocity
- Conflict resolution
- Focusing on goals: taking concrete steps; building on success; learning from failure
- Proactive stance: preventing problems, crises; preparing for future challenges

Families most often come for help in crisis. When they are overwhelmed and their presenting problems skew attention toward deficits, a resilience-based framework offers a positive and pragmatic focus for intervention; it can generate optimism in the therapeutic process while grounding changes in specific, reachable objectives.

A family resilience approach requires an evolving view of family challenges and responses over time, rather than a cross-sectional view at one point in time. If we are to help families meet the demands of different phases of adaptation, we need to help them draw upon the various strengths needed to approach and impending crisis, to adjust in the immediate aftermath, and to reorganize their lives over the long term.

A basic premise guiding this systems-based approach is that serious crises have an impact on the whole family, and that, in turn, family coping processes influence the recovery and resilience of all members and the family as a unit. How family confronts and manages a disruptive experience, buffers stress, effectively reorganizes, and reinvests in life pursuits will influence adaptations for all members. Interventions aim

to build family resources to deal more effectively with stresses and rebound strengthened, both individually and as a relational system. Fostering the family's ability to master its immediate crisis situation also increases its capacity to meet future challenges.

p.135 family resilience can be mobilized through **4 general protective mechanisms:**

- decreasing risk factors
- reducing negative chain reactions that heighten risk for sustained impact and further crises
- Strengthening protective family processes and reducing vulnerabilities
- Bolstering family and individual esteem and efficacy through successful problem mastery

Tracking stressors and coping / adaptation processes over time

A timeline is useful to track presenting symptoms in relation to past, ongoing and threatened stress events, their meanings, and family coping strategies. Often family members become so focused on symptoms that they may not connect them to other crisis situations and stresses on the system.

Making meaning of crisis experiences – resilience is fostered as we help them gain a sense of coherence, rendering their crisis experience more comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful.

Clarifying ambiguity – what they have been told by whom, and what they believe deep down. Often family members hold quite different assumptions and beliefs. Helping family members to gain information eases their anxieties and helps them cope and adapt. We can encourage them to actively pursue and share information, and can coach them on locating reliable sources.

Helping families live with uncertainty – we need to help families to live with uncertainty. For some, the future course and outcome of a life-threatening situation cannot be predicted or controlled. For others, we must help them clarify what they can about past events and find a way to live with persisting ambiguity and the possibility that they may never achieve full clarification.

Seizing opportunities in the midst of crisis – when facing a crisis, it's helpful to look back to past family experience with adversity, for lessons that can be drawn about both helpful and unhelpful approaches. In the aftermath of a crisis, we can help family

members explore what can be learned from their situation. There may be important lessons about risk and vulnerability, or the about need to anticipate pitfalls and take more precaution in the future. In building resilience, we help families strive to integrate the fullness of their crisis experience.

Adversity may bring a startling recognition of the importance of relationships that had been taken for granted or written off. A crisis can lead family members to question, review, and redirect their lives.

Normalizing family distress -

Depathologizing and contextualizing the problem situation – a fundamental tenet of strength-based approaches to family therapy is that most families do not seek suffering or intend harm to their members. It is crucial to explore any blaming and stigmatizing experiences families may have had in contacts with other professionals. Clinicians should explore each family's beliefs about its own normality or deficiency and the models and myths they hold as ideal. We need to disengage assumptions of pathology from the rationale for participation I therapy and make it explicit that every family member is an essential resource in problem solving.

The aim of normalizing is to depathologize and contextualize family distress. We must be careful neither to oversimplify the complexity of the family life nor to err by normalizing truly destructive family patterns.

Using respectful language and constructs – effective intervention requires learning the language and perspective of each family, in order to see problems through its members' eyes – to understand the values and expectations that influence their approach to handling the problem or their inability to change.

Reframing and relabeling – through such techniques as reframing and relabeling, a problem situation can be redefined in order to cast it in a new light and to shift a family's rigid view or response. Symptomatic behavior can be viewed as a survival strategy – an attempt to live with an unbearable situation or to prevent a feared outcome. We may note the helpful, albeit misguided, intentions of caring members trying to help one another.

Identifying, affirming, and building family strengths – although no family is strong in every area, all families possess strengths and resources. Amid very real limitations, we can foster resilience by noticing members' assets and potentials, and by finding ways to nurture and praise their positive intentions, efforts and achievements.

Crediting positive intentions – the assumption of a positive intent behind or alongside problematic behavior helps family members to become less defensive and more open.

Praising efforts and achievements – alongside problem solving, we can ask how new endeavors are going and to applaud progress. The praise offered must be genuine however. We can honor the relational base of resilience as we celebrate individual success.

Drawing out hidden resources and lost competence – Family members benefit from therapeutic conversations that bring into awareness untapped resources or strengths to which they have become blinded. We can help them to regain lost competence and to recognize loving concern that may be overshadowed by their current distress.

Finding strengths in the midst of adversity – as we support their efforts to manage a crisis well, family members often discover resources they never knew they had and forge new areas of competence.

Building empathic connection with and between family members – we can help family members gain greater compassion for one another through asking them to share their life stories, the traumatic experiences and pain they have suffered, and the resilience they have shown in weathering those ordeals.

Adopting a positive, future-oriented focus – families should be encouraged to consider and prepare together for later-life decisions – discussions that are commonly avoided. Future-oriented questions can open up new possibilities for later-life fulfillment.

In work with distressed couples and families, a positive, future-oriented focus shifts the emphasis of therapy from ‘what went wrong?’ to ‘what can be done for enhanced functioning and well-being?’ together, we and our clients can then envision possible options that fit each family situation, and optimistic yet realistic aims that are reachable through shared, constructive efforts.

In helping a family move forward, it’s important to make connections between the past, present and future so that family members can understand current distressed and integrate their experiences. They can’t change the past but we can help them learn from it to chart a better future course.

Refocusing from complaints to aims – from ‘what’s wrong’ to ‘what can be done to make things better.’ What would improve an unbearable situation? What would a

more satisfying family life look like? What changes would they have to make to achieve it?

Instilling hope and optimism – has there ever been a time when you felt more hopeful about the situation? What was different then? Who was most helpful? How? Explore what might be learned and applied to the present dilemma, and what they imagine could help them regain hope.

Encouraging shared efforts, concrete steps, and perseverance – to foster family resilience, we need to create a therapeutic climate that maximizes the possibilities for members to be successful and to experience success as largely due to their shared efforts and abilities. These affirming beliefs and successful experiences generate realistic hope and optimism that through supporting one another, they can master their challenges.

Small successes can be sources of pride and accomplishment to build on, with increasing confidence and competence.

Helping families to accept human limitations – to foster the belief that mistakes and failures are normal aspects of life, especially under stressful conditions.

When family members experience setbacks, we need to hang in with them to encourage them to rebound and persist in their efforts.

Involving families in recovery from individual trauma

Even when a crisis strikes an individual and other family members are not directly touched by the event, a systemic approach considers how all are nonetheless affected by it and by the family response. A family resilience approach draws members together for mutual support and healing and become better resources for one another.