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The power of resilience

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Approaching resilience

What enables some young people to do well in school, to form meaningful relationships and feel hopeful about the future, in spite of adversity, while others become depressed or self-destructive? This is a question that is often asked—by researchers, clinicians, parents, teachers and young people themselves. And it was a question that was raised through Dr. Tatyana Barankin's own clinical practice.

In 1989, Dr. Barankin founded and directed a clinic in Toronto for children at risk for developing mental health problems—the only clinic of its kind in Canada. Over the next 15 years, she—as head of a team—assessed and treated close to 700 families—all of whom had at least one parent with a mental health problem. While she saw many people overwhelmed by the challenges in their lives, she also saw other family members who managed extremely well, and who had an almost supernormal way of coping. The adversity in their lives varied: some had experienced abuse, others had a parent with a severe mental health problem, some had gone through teen pregnancy, still others had been injured in car accidents or had come to Canada seeking refuge from war in their home country. But they all had one thing in common: these young people managed not only to adapt, but to blossom—in spite of the trauma they had experienced. Through individual, sibling and group cognitive therapy, these children and families became more adaptable in dealing with family stress.

Dr. Nazilla Khanlou's experience was a natural complement to Dr. Barankin's. Like Dr. Barankin, she has an understanding of clinical issues (having worked as a psychiatric nurse on an acute inpatient psychiatric unit). As well, she has a community perspective—having, over the last decade, shifted her focus toward mental health promotion among youth in community settings such as schools.

Dr. Khanlou became interested in resilience after doing a study among girls whose parents had immigrated to Canada. While going through transitions associated with adolescence, she saw how the young women in the study were able to straddle their cultures of origin and Canadian mainstream culture, were active in school and their communities and were positive about their future.

Since then, she has conducted other studies that have, like her first study, revealed a profound strength and resilience in youth. Her findings differ from the one-dimensional way youth are often perceived in contemporary society, which is as a "problem" requiring a solution, rather than as young people with strengths, creativity and contributions to make. Dr. Khanlou believes this book will help to change this image by encouraging parents, teachers and front-line workers to focus on young people's strengths, and by making them more aware and understanding of the difficulties in young people's lives. She also believes that we need to address prejudice and discrimination in our society, because inclusive and just environments help all people thrive and reach their potential.

The combination of a clinical and community background has impressed on Dr. Khanlou how promoting mental health and resilience in children and youth requires multiple approaches. Differing approaches are needed not only in improving health and social services, but also in challenging society to look at the social determinants of mental health (such as income, education and inclusion) and their influence on young people. In the last chapter, on environmental factors, she wants to make the reader more aware of how social factors affect young people's sense of well-being—and how resilience in children and youth is a result of the interplay between their individual traits and abilities and the social context in which they live.

Dr. Barankin and Dr. Khanlou draw from diverse fields—such as psychology, psychiatry, nursing, sociology and health promotion—to provide a new way of looking at resilience in children and youth. Their message is hopeful—that is, that most children are resilient and that resilience is something that can be developed and nurtured.

Current thinking and practice

Resilience is not a new term in academic and prevention circles, nor is the idea of nurturing people's strengths a new idea. In fact, the view that resilience is an important aspect of mental well-being has been gaining attention among health professionals and researchers over the last 25 or so years. Their experience and studies have increasingly shown that how people cope with the challenges they face in different life stages is influenced by their sense of who they are, how they relate to the world and others around them, and how well they manage the various parts of their lives.

However, there is little written for parents, teachers and front-line workers about the qualities that help make young people resilient. The resilience literature has tended to focus on the individual, whereas we see resilience as requiring a more ecological, integrative approach that looks at the interactions between young people and their families, communities and society. We wanted to write a book especially for parents, and for the people who work or volunteer with young people each day—from teachers and school administrators to daycare, recreation-centre and youth-shelter workers; sports coaches; Girl Guide and Boy Scout leaders; camp counsellors and directors. By exploring the interplay of factors that contribute to resilience, we hope that front-line workers, teachers and parents will be better equipped to nurture resilience in the young people in their lives.

About the book

Growing Up Resilient explains what health care providers mean when they talk about resilience. It explores what risk and protective factors can affect resilience in young people. And it gives tips on how to build resilience in children and youth.

We have divided the factors that affect resilience into three broad categories: those that relate to the individual, the family and the environment or community within which the young person lives. This division not only helps parents, teachers, community workers and others more clearly understand the roots of resilience—it also enables them to use a variety of ways to build resilience in children and youth. Young people's individual, family and environmental factors are interrelated, complex and diverse—and there is more than one way to help young people become resilient.

Each chapter is introduced by the story of a real person from around the world who, as a child or adolescent, lived through extremely difficult circumstances. These stories are meant to inspire us—to remind us how some people not only manage to adapt but actually excel in the face of life's difficulties. Their achievements are remarkable because they showcase how their resilience benefited not only themselves, but also the world around them.

Many of us know people who may not be famous, but who have also shown great strength and resilience in their lives. They may be our parents, friends or neighbours. Or they may be us. The potential for resilience lives in everyone.