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Ben Johnson: Building psychological resilience in adults and children

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Special to the Journal

This column is about building psychological resilience — coping with a range of common negative feelings and experiences. In particular, dealing with rejection, frustration, and failure can be extremely difficult for many individuals.

I have wanted to write this column for a while now, because many of the people we read about in the news — who act out destructively against themselves or others — seem low in psychological resilience.

It is striking how often they have suffered some form of a rejection, had a need or want frustrated or denied, or failed at some kind of task or performance. If we can increase the psychological resilience of those around us, be they friends, children, students, or colleagues, we may make a crucial difference.

The strategies for managing sensitivities to rejection, frustration and failure overlap, so I will discuss them together. The ways of helping others are linked to the ways of helping yourself.

Appreciate the varied consequences of doubting one's ability to cope. A teen girl may spend a ton of time worrying about being liked, perhaps obsessing about her clothes. If a boy is frustrated with a difficult math problem, he might head to Facebook or lash out at his mother. If you flubbed a presentation at work, you might want to withdraw, thinking it time for a mental health day or perhaps a new career. Some move quickly to blame and attack others when they feel like they have failed. "They were such jerks." "You didn't help me!" "This school stinks!"

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Identify zones of personal sensitivity and predict typical triggers. It can be helpful to diagnose whether you are more sensitive to rejection, frustration, or failure. You may be exquisitely tuned to any hint of disapproval and yet be able to laugh off a loss in a card game easily. Alternatively, you may get easily frustrated trying to fix your computer, but not worry much if someone seems cold. To build awareness, kids could be prompted to discuss whether they get more upset if they are excluded, stuck at a problem, or doing worse than others.

Normalize difficult experiences. Everyone struggles — it is just a question of flavor and degree. Try to get people talking about this dark side. Parents could talk to their kids openly about their own difficult times. Share stories about when you felt like giving up and about your worst ideas ("I thought she would change" — perhaps?).

Validate needs. Healthy people prefer to be accepted and liked. Most people want connection and feel badly when they don't get it. When someone is frustrated, acknowledge that there is a valid wish to figure things out, to make progress, and to avoid the bumps in the road.

Manage expectations. Make ever-present the awareness in your coworkers and your family that many journeys take tremendous perseverance and involve twists and turns. Tell kids lots of stories about how challenging it can be to navigate the social world. Children want to be liked and accepted, yet they are not necessarily aware of who is a good match and who is not. Create flexibility whenever you possibly can. I find it useful to keep reminding myself that everything in life involves follow up — and at least four phone calls or emails.

Model resilience. Share stories of situations that have necessitated Plan B, Plan C, and more. Acknowledge the uncertainty that is usually on board with our decisions. Teachers can be powerful role models of resilience, sharing times they have carried on and sought help from others. A good story of resilience will be remembered forever.

Scan for positives and communicate positives. It is hard for a child or an adult to be resilient, if they feel like the only thing others see in them are their bad habits. Control attempts ("Put away your clothes!") without a warm and positive relationship will usually fail. To build resilience, don't make withdrawals ("You disappointed me today"), if you haven't made genuine deposits.

Teach specific skills. I find it upsetting when an adult yells at a child for a behavior, assuming it is laziness or lack of willpower, when really the issue is that the child does not have the cognitive framework or behavioral repertoire to succeed. In the world of sports, screaming at a child — or an elite college athlete — for choking during a match is likely useless and destructive, fueling more anxiety. Most probably the motivation was there; the problem was lack of internal resources.

In summary, you can work at building resilience to the unwelcome but too frequent visitors in life — rejection, frustration, and failure. I suspect the more you help the people you care about be able to roll with these challenges, the less preoccupied with their possibility they will be. The reward will be more room inside to savor the sweetness of acceptance, the satisfaction of progress, and the thrill of success.

I encourage you to take note of those around you and take some measure of responsibility for strengthening their resilience and helping them to deal better with pain. It is far too costly when someone in our community falls through the cracks and copes in a destructive way.

Ben Johnson, PhD, ABPP is a clinical psychologist who practices, supervises, and teaches psychotherapy at RICBT, Brown University, and URI. He loves helping people apply a broad range of psychological concepts and strategies to reduce isolation and improve their moods, relationships, productivity, and lives.

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