

Kowhai Programme

Support for families, whānau & carers

Responding with Resilience

What is resilience?

Resilience is often thought of as “bouncing back”. When looked at closely, this idea suggests returning to what was there before. When we consider challenging times and multiple losses, striving to what was there previously, can be an unreasonable expectation to have of ourselves. This can lead to more stress and distress. This is not resilience.

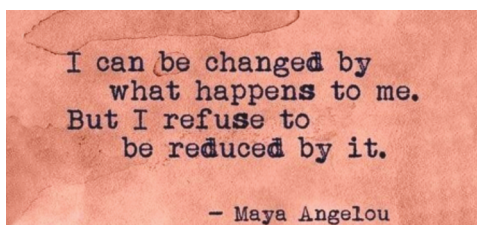
Resilience is about a pathway that we follow that allows us to be flexible, to adapt to challenges, to keep moving rather than feeling paralysed, to maintain and restore wellbeing, and even to experience growth in the midst of hard times.

People can be resilient, and families can be resilient too. For families, resilience can be about reviewing established patterns and roles, forming new routines, and creating a new way of working together as a family. Resilience in families can also be about maintaining connection between family members, good communication and mutual support.

Resilient people and resilient families respond to adversity in ways that are unique to them – there is no how-to manual to getting through challenging times, or tasks to complete in order to become resilient. There are some ideas that might be helpful to consider, and we talk a bit more about these later on. It's also useful to consider what evidence there already is of resiliency in your life, and what you can do to nurture and grow this.

What evidence do you already have of resilient responses in your life?

We can be very good at noticing and remembering the mistakes we think we might have made. We can also be very good at minimising the hard work that we do. When asked “How did you get through?” many people reply “I just did” or “I got through because the problem went away”. These statements overlook the practical and emotional actions that a person or family might take in order to get through, to solve problems, or even just in everyday life.



Ask some questions about challenges you have faced in the past. Even small challenges can highlight resiliency:

- What was I focusing on that was helpful?
- What was I prioritising?
- What personal values were held onto during this challenge?
- How did I adapt?
- What skills and personal characteristics did I use in order to meet this challenge?
- How did I stay connected to people who are important to me?
- What resources did I need at that time and how did I ensure I had them?
- What about periods of uncertainty in my life? How did I deal with those?
- What have I learnt from my past that will help me, not only to meet this current challenge, but grow through it?

Some ideas that can be helpful to consider Rituals and routines

Rituals and routines can help to create a sense of stability amongst disruption. They can be rich with meaning and help define who we are as people and as families. Maintaining some rituals and routines can help provide continuity between the past, present and future. Creating new rituals and routines can help us integrate the losses and changes brought about by illness into our lives. They can also help to connect family members. Rituals and routines can be spiritual (such as prayer or meditation), practical (such as time for medications), or morning and bedtime routines, family dinners, or a simple cup of tea in the garden.

Tolerating uncertainty

When someone is unwell, we can have many questions for which there is no answer. We can also often feel out of control. Resilience is about managing the stress and anxiety that comes along with long periods of uncertainty and not-knowing. It is also about sometimes feeling two seemingly things at once and knowing that is normal (for example: “I want this to be over” and “I don’t want her to die”). Look for ideas around managing this stress and anxiety, and talk to the Hospice team if you need some support with this.

Hope

Hope is an integral part of resilience. Feeling hopeful during times of suffering and difficulty can be tough. It can seem like “all hope is gone” when something we value is lost. Looking back over your life, you will notice that you have hoped for different things at different times. During times of frequent change (for example when a family member is very unwell), hope needs to be expanded and re-evaluated. We might continue to hope for some big things – like a miracle. What else is it you hope for? These might be small hopes and might change from day to day – for example; hoping to attend a family member’s birthday, or hoping for a restful night. What are your hopes?

Maintaining perspective

One aspect of a resilient response is being able to recognise and acknowledge both the good and the bad. Uncertainty and loss can create some painful emotions. We can also judge ourselves harshly, dwell on the mistakes we believe we have made, or believe we won’t cope. These can create feelings of being overwhelmed, fear and helplessness. Even amongst difficult times, there can be sparkling moments of joy, contentment, comfort, love, and ability. Appreciate these times and talk with your family about how to create more of these moments. In addition to thinking about the demands and losses of the situation, also take into account your resources and capabilities. Make compassion and appreciation of yourself, your family and of the way in which you are responding to this challenge a priority!

Setting reasonable goals

Setting goals can help with motivation and inspire us when they are achieved. However they can also be an unnecessary source of stress and pressure when they are based on unreasonable expectations. Reasonable goals take into account what is possible, and also make allowance for those things we have no control over. Set goals to help practice new behaviours and guide what you are focusing on. Generic terms such as “better” (for example: a goal of getting better at swimming) can make it hard to know when we have reached our goal. It helps if goals are simple, specific (for example, to swim a length of the pool without stopping) and not too many at one time.

Ways of managing stress

There are some ways of coping that can feel good in the short-term but cause harm, and can ultimately lead to more stress. These could be about using alcohol, drugs or other harmful substances, gambling, or behaviours such as compulsive shopping or compulsive eating. Turn instead towards more effective ways of managing stress and focus on nourishing your body, mind and spirit every day – exercise, good food, meditation, distraction, music, reading, sleep, rest, quiet time, company, laughter, mindfulness, journaling, etc. During hard times, working towards managing stress and emotional pain is a more reasonable goal than trying to eliminate it.

Finding support and resources

Resiliency is about knowing when to ask for support and where to find resources. You don’t have to do it tough or go it alone.

- When you need them, use the resources you already have such as family, social networks and spiritual supports.
- Look to your past for resources that you have found useful or talk to people you trust for some ideas.
- Other sessions in the Kowhai programme can help with information, practical strategies around caring for someone who is unwell, caring for yourself, and more.
- Hospice can help with counselling, spiritual care and social work support. Hospice counsellors and the Kowhai programme coordinator can also point you towards other useful resources if needed. Please call 0800 473 6005.

Growing through the hard times

Beyond simply surviving or coping with challenges, we can be transformed by them in many ways. This transformation could be:

- an awareness of possibilities and opportunities.
- an enhanced sense of personal strength and ability.
- a greater appreciation for life and living.
- enriched meaning and purpose to life.
- improved ways of relating to others.
- empathy for and a greater capacity to support others.
- improved self-esteem.
- improved communication and solidarity in families.

Being resilient does not mean that you will never experience feeling overwhelmed, Sadness, anger, frustration, or grief.

It is about the ability to persevere and thrive *despite* these.