

# Kowhai Programme

Support for families, whānau & carers

## Building Resilience

### What is resilience?

It is the capacity to recover from difficulties; the ability to respond, absorb, and adapt to a disruptive event. Currently it might be seen as the ability to keep providing ongoing care, in a difficult time. But resiliency can also involve profound personal growth.

Psychologists have identified some of the factors that make a person resilient, such as a positive attitude, optimism, the ability to regulate emotions, and the ability to see failure as a form of helpful feedback. It helps to:

- Practice an attitude of mindfulness, of living in the now.
- Share or release your emotions; holding it all in can have physical effects – illness, pain, exhaustion.
- Choose a friend, or friends, you can talk to safely.
- Be gentle with yourself: gentle music, gentle treatment, gentle tv/radio and gentle social media

Studies show that family resilience really matters – keeping the family together after an event, resuming routines and ordinary functioning as best you can, can help children cope. Getting back into some normal routine can reinforce that normal still exists, even if in a new form. Doing some routine activity such as short bouts of work can provide a welcome rest and temporary refuge from grieving.

### So, how do we build resilience?

From a practical perspective, it helps to start by listing all the positive emotions available to us, drawing attention to their broad range. It isn't just being happy but includes humour, curiosity and loving; feeling pride, awe, hope, inspiration and gratitude, even serenity.

**Curiosity:** Searching for information, finding other's stories can be reassuring. *What are you curious about? What would you like to find out more about?*

**Pride:** Noticing what you and/or your family are achieving, despite difficulties encourages you too. *What in your life makes you proud? What have you overcome that you can be proud of?*

**Awe:** Watching or seeing something that inspires awe, perhaps looking at mountains, or a pod of whales, or simply being in the bush, can remind you that you are part of a bigger universe and broaden your perspective. *When was the last time you felt awe? Where could you go that would fill you with awe?*

**Hope:** What you hope for can change from day to day, month to month. It may start as tiny little flicker but foster it and it can grow. It gives you strength, and supports you moving forward. *Given all that might have happened, what are you hoping for now?*

**Inspiration:** Research has shown that having a role model, or even role models, is a key factor in promoting resilience. They may come from your own life, or from reading of others who have been on similar journeys. *Who inspires you? What stories have you heard that have helped you?*

**Gratitude:** Gratitude helps deal with grief by enabling you to focus on what you have rather than exclusively focusing on what you have lost. To take a broader look at life and appreciate what is still good. *What are you grateful for? Who are you grateful for?*

**Serenity:** Seek out some quiet moments, some moments of calm. It might be reading a book, or headphones on with music, whatever allows you to find peace. *Where can you find some calm? What do you have to do to secure five minutes for yourself?*

**Humour:** It is recognised that people who genuinely laughed and smiled more when talking about their loss coped better in initial stages of loss than those who did not. Proper cackling laughter has been shown to be associated with reduced anger and increased enjoyment. *Which of your friends can still make you laugh? Which films, podcasts or TV shows can you turn to for an easy laugh?*

**Love:** Bereavement is about love. The love you had for another person, the love you have for them still. It prompts us to reach out, to look beyond ourselves. When the worst happens, it is our social networks and resources that we rely on. Keep on loving.

Because positive emotions are fleeting and often go unnoticed – unlike negative emotions which tend to hang around – there's much to be gained by actively seeking them out. Try to recognise these emotions as they occur in your life and notice the opportunities to experience more of them.

## Build your connections

**Prioritise relationships.** Connecting with empathetic and understanding people can remind you that you're not alone in the midst of difficulties. Focus on finding trustworthy and compassionate individuals who validate your feelings. The pain of traumatic events can lead some people to isolate themselves, but it's important to accept help and support from those who care about you.

**Join a group.** Along with one-on-one relationships, some people find that being active in civic groups, faith-based communities, or other local organisations provides social support and can help you reclaim hope. Research groups in your area that could offer you support and a sense of purpose when you need it.

## Foster wellness

**Take care of your body.** Self-care may be a popular phrase, but it's also a legitimate practice for mental health and building resilience. That's because stress is just as much physical as it is emotional. Promoting positive lifestyle factors like proper nutrition, ample sleep, hydration and regular exercise can strengthen your body to adapt to stress and reduce the toll of emotions like anxiety or depression.

**Practice mindfulness.** Mindful journaling, yoga, and other spiritual practices like prayer or meditation can also help people build connections and restore hope. When you journal, meditate, or pray, ruminate on positive aspects of your life and recall the things you're grateful for.

## Avoid negative outlets

It may be tempting to mask your pain with alcohol, illicit drugs or other substances, but that's like putting a bandage on a deep wound. Focus instead on giving your body resources to manage stress, rather than seeking to eliminate the feeling of stress altogether.

## Find purpose

**Help others.** Whether you volunteer with a local charity or simply support a friend in their own time of need, you can garner a sense of purpose, foster self-worth and tangibly help others, all of which can empower you to grow in resilience.

**Be proactive.** It's helpful to acknowledge and accept your emotions during hard times, but it's also important to help you foster self-discovery by asking yourself, "What can I do about a problem in my life?" If the problems seem too big to tackle, break them down into manageable pieces. When it is one big problem, such as your loved one is dying, break off the little pieces that you can do something about.

## Move toward your goals

Develop some realistic goals and do something regularly — even if it seems like a small accomplishment — that enables you to move toward the things you want to accomplish.

## Embrace healthy thoughts

**Keep things in perspective.** How you think can play a significant part in how you feel — and how resilient you are when faced with obstacles. Try to identify areas of irrational thinking, such as a tendency to catastrophise difficulties and adopt a more balanced and realistic thinking pattern. You may not be able to change a highly stressful event, but you can change how you interpret and respond to it.

**Accept change.** Accept that change is a part of life.

**Maintain a hopeful outlook.** It's hard to be positive when life isn't going your way. An optimistic outlook empowers you to expect that good things will happen to you. Accept that some things are unchangeable, but seek something new to hope for. Even something small to start.

**Learn from your past.** By looking back at who or what was helpful in previous times of distress, you may discover how you can respond effectively to new difficult situations. Remind yourself of where you've been able to find strength before.

## Seeking help

Getting help when you need it is crucial in building your resilience. For many people, using their own resources and the kinds of strategies listed above may be enough for building their resilience. But at times, an individual might get stuck or have difficulty making progress on the road to resilience.

It is important to get professional help if you feel like you are unable to function as well as you would like or perform basic activities of daily living as a result of a traumatic or stressful life experience.

The important thing is to remember you're not alone on the journey.

## Identifying personal strengths

Identifying your own personal strengths and reflecting on them can greatly build your confidence. This website offers a quick, five minute, online survey which determines your leading strengths of character.

[www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)

Studies show that knowing our strengths is associated with a raft of desirable outcomes.

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