



Resiliency and Substance Use, What's the Connection?

Substance Misuse Prevention Newsletter: A Collection of Readings

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Consequences Related to a Low Sense of Resiliency

When chronic stress is not managed it can not only hinder one's sense of resiliency, but also negatively impact our mind and body. However, by adopting coping skills we can often reverse these negative consequences by building a sense of resiliency.

Mind -

Chronic stress can have a profound impact on our brain. For example, excess cortisol can result in a loss of synaptic connections and can even shrink the prefrontal cortex (TedEd, 2015). The prefrontal cortex controls concentration, decision making and judgement (TedEd, 2015). In times of stress, we might also turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use, which can further exacerbate underlying mental instability. Additionally, chronic stress can impede memory and learning due brain cell loss within the hippocampus (Cherry, 2010)

[Ted Ed Video - How Stress Affects your Brain](#)

Body -

The entire body can be negatively impacted by chronic stress. Some negative consequences include hypertension, higher risk of stroke and heart attack, high glucose levels, amenorrhea, GI upset and a weakened the immune system (Pietrangelo, 2020).

University Health and Counseling Services

What is Resiliency?

According to the American Psychological Association [APA] (2012), resiliency is defined as an individual's ability to cope and adapt in the face of adversity. Stress is a fact of life, but how we react to stress can have a profound impact on our overall wellbeing. We all react differently to stressors but finding a way to process these emotions allows us to adapt and move forward with our lives (APA, 2012). One's ability to deal with life shaping experiences instills a sense of empowerment, which contributes to our ability to successfully tackle future struggles and continually better ourselves and our lives (APA, 2012). However, it is important to understand the resiliency is not always an innate skill and that many factors impact one's level of resiliency (APA, 2012). Some factors that impact resiliency may include history of trauma, socioeconomic factors, early attachments to parents, and pure luck. Furthermore, ones "locus of control" can impact resiliency (Konnikova, 2016). This means that one feels that they control their destiny, and that their life trajectory is not defined by past and current events (Konnikova, 2016). Developing resiliency takes time and patience but can be an invaluable skillset once mobilized and embedded into one's sense of self.

Articles Exploring Resiliency:

[The NY Times - What Makes Some People More Resilient Than Others](#)

[The New Yorker - How People Learn to Become Resilient](#)

How is Resiliency and Substance Use Connected?

When resiliency is developed early on, youth often exhibit characteristics such as high self-esteem, ability to ask for help, empathy and self-awareness, all of which can help to prevent substance use (Access Health, 2020). According to Access Health (2020), research has shown that having a sense of resiliency correlates with a lower incidence of first-time substance use. Furthermore, fostering protective factors, particularly positive relationships, has been shown to strengthen resilience and prevent substance use in adolescents (Access Health, 2020).



Benefits of Building a Sense of Resiliency

- Ability to Work Towards Goals
- Ability to Ask for Help
- Increased Self Esteem
- Forming and Maintaining Strong Interpersonal Relationships
- Feeling Supported
- Optimism
- Sense of Empowerment
- Mental Stability
- Physical Wellbeing
- Healthy Coping Skills
- Sense of Purpose & Self - Worth
- Sense of Courage
- Ability to move forward in life

Coping Skills Help you to Avoid

- Substance use
- Disordered eating
- Dysregulated sleep patterns
- Continual avoidance of problems
- Feeling Overwhelmed & Stressed

Can Resiliency be Developed...Yes!

Learning and practicing coping skills can help us to become more resilient, which allows us to reap the many benefits associated with resiliency. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) there are two types of coping, problem-focused and emotion-focused. The situation and desired outcome often determine what type of coping techniques are used. (Lumen, n.d.).

[Click here to read more](#)

Emotion Focused Coping – Emotion focused coping is most often used to manage feelings around the problem or deal with problems that cannot be changed. For example, a death in the family is something that is out of our control, but emotion focused coping can help to mitigate the overwhelming suffering that accompanies the grieving process (Lumen, n.d.).

Reframing: Reframing allows someone to find the “good” in a negative experience by changing how we view the situation (Raypole, 2020).

Optimism: Some techniques include understanding that you can try something again, focusing on your successes instead of your failures, positive self-talk and daily affirmations (Raypole, 2020).

Distance: Temporarily distancing yourself from a problem allows you to de-stress, self-reflect and reapproach the problem in a less emotionally charged way. Ways to do this include meditation or simply going for a walk with a friend to give your mind a break.

[Click here](#) & [here](#) to read more about emotion focused coping skills.

Problem Focused Coping – Problem focused coping means that the individual uses problem solving skills to take action in order to reduce stress (Lumen, n.d.).

Problem Solving & Setting Goals: This process entails weighing the pros and cons of various solutions to a problem and then putting these solutions in to action in order to change an outcome and reduce stress (Lumen, n.d.). For example, someone who is struggling in a class might reach out to a professor for help, find a tutor and set aside dedicated study times. Try tackling these goals in small, manageable steps so you do not feel overwhelmed with the process. A to do list can be an easy visual guide that helps you tackle these goals.

When individuals use these coping techniques and problem-solving skills to change their lifestyle or abstain from substances, they gain strength through the capacity to change, tapping into their natural ability to be resilient. This is recovery.

[Click here](#) to read more about problem focused vs. emotion focused skills.

[Click here](#) to read more about improving resiliency with coping skills.

Neuroplasticity & Resiliency

Did you know that you have the power to “rewire” your brain? When we create new ways of thinking or habits, and continually implement these strategies, our brain adapts and forms new neural pathways (Sentis, n.d.). After a while this new way of being becomes innately engrained in our sense of self. So over time coping mechanisms become less work! [Click here to learn more](#)



For comments on this newsletter or suggestions for future articles please contact: Diane Geyer, LCPC, LADC, CCS, NCC~ Clinician and Coordinator of Clinical Substance Use Services at USM or Jillian Littlefield, RN and Graduate Assistant ~ Email: diane.geyer@maine.edu, jillian.littlefield@maine.edu