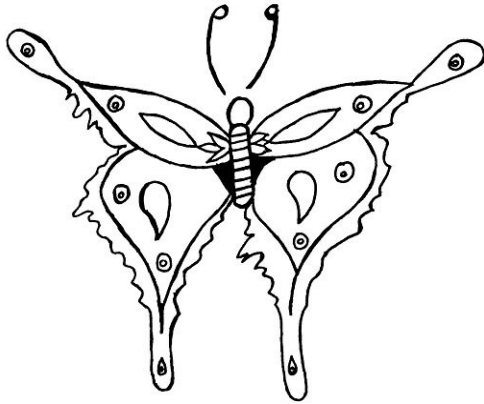


Countering Depression with the Five Building Blocks of Resilience

Edith H. Grotberg



From: Grotberg, Edith. (1999). Countering depression with the five building blocks of resilience. *Reaching Today's Youth* 4(1, Fall): 66-72.

Reprinted with permission from Reaching Today's Youth.
Copyright 1999 by the National Education Service, (800) 733-6786. <http://www.nesonline.com>

As most individuals who work with youth can attest, depression is all too common in our young people. While we do not always see the extremes of clinical depression, we do see enough detachment from joy and happiness to alert us that things are not as they should be. Certainly, today's youth face many difficulties and misfortunes that can become overwhelming. Far from being protected from the stressors of adult life, young people are often exposed to a whole spectrum of adult realities well before they are emotionally equipped to deal with them. Take, for example, the very real adversities of losing a friend seeing parents divorce, moving, failing a subject, being sick, not making the team, being fired from a job, and being sexually or physically abused, injured, cheated, lied to, betrayed, rejected, bullied, or humiliated - all of which young people face. It is a great challenge for many youth to cope with these adversities without being overwhelmed by them.

When youth do become overwhelmed by the adversities they face, the result is often depressed thoughts and behavior patterns. Although virtually everyone has these thoughts at one time or another, when they persist for long enough, they can coalesce into the emotional state of depression. Often, youth give clues to their feelings of depression in their conversation. Whenever you hear a young person make any or many of the following statements, you should be aware that depression is possible:

- * I feel that life is an endless series of problems with no solutions in sight.
- * Sometimes I feel like I'm being pushed around in life.
- * I feel like I have little control over the things that happen to me.
- * I feel like I can't really change whatever is going on in my life.
- * I feel emotionally empty most of the time.
- * I feel sad a lot of the time.
- * My stomach hurts a lot of the time, for no reason (Zwaigenbaum, et al 1999)
- * I feel angry with the world and with myself.
- * I feel like there is no hope.
- * I sometimes feel like I would rather die than go on living.

Teaching Resilience

Not all youth who face adversity become depressed; some exhibit resilience-the ability to deal with adversity without becoming overwhelmed by it. Whether young people develop depression or resilience depends largely upon their feelings of powerlessness or capability. For youth to become resilient, they must feel that they have the ability to do something about their situations - to meet their challenges. When they have doubt about their ability to find a successful solution, feelings of depression are in the making. Unfortunately, depression is a viscous cycle. The youth's feelings of depression take too much energy and tend to immobilize him or her, thus leading to even greater feelings of powerlessness. The results become cumulative, making each an effort more and more difficult.

There is, however, good news. The cycle is not irreversible. Youth can learn to respond to adversity with resilience rather than depression. Feelings of powerlessness can be changed to those of capability by teaching youth the five basic building blocks of resilience: trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity. These five building blocks correspond to the first five developmental stages of life (Erikson, 1985) and contribute to a youth's ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, or even be transformed by experiences of adversity (Grotberg, 1999a). In other words, the development of the building blocks equips young people to deal with the adversities of life that tend to bring on depression.

The building blocks incorporate a paradigm of resilience that forms the process for dealing with life's adversities. The paradigm consists of three components (Grotberg, 1999b):

Paradigm of Resilience		
Component	Definition	Building Blocks
I HAVE	Supports around each individual to promote resilience	Trust
I AM	Encouragement in developing the inner strengths of confidence, self-esteem, and responsibility	Autonomy Identity
I CAN	Acquisition of interpersonal and problem solving skills	Initiative Industry

Many children and youth, especially those who seem to be moving toward depression, have not had the opportunity to develop the building blocks of resilience. While this is unfortunate, it is not too late for them to develop them now -independently and/or with the help of teachers, counselors, mentors, and coaches. In short, resilience can be built as part of the developmental process. Those who work with youth can build it by showing young people how to use services, how to feel confident and empathic, how to resolve interpersonal conflicts, and how to master academic skills.

The remainder of the article will discuss the five building blocks of resilience and how you can help develop them in the young people you serve. To help you think from a youth's perspective, the discussion of each building block is written as if it were addressed to a young person.

Building Block # 1: Trust

Trust is defined as believing in and relying on another person or thing. The trust we develop in our lives begins at birth. As babies, we had no choice but to trust others to love us, feed us, comfort us, and protect us. Our very survival was at stake. Then we began to trust ourselves to work out a rhythm of feeding, calming, and managing our bodies. This trust was tied to special people to whom we felt emotionally attached. We loved them; we were bonded with them. As we grew up, we learned to trust others - not necessarily to love them, but to have good feelings about them. We learned to trust ourselves - our ability to do things, have friends, and develop a career or a hobby. We even learned to trust the world. All of this trust was not blind - it was an informed trust, a selective trust.

Helping Youth Develop Trust

Anyone working with youth knows how important it is to develop a trusting relationship with each individual or with each group. You do that by being reliable, by respecting each person, by not betraying confidences, and by accepting the youth as valued and important persons. After you have established a trusting relationship with the youth, you can help them develop skills they can use to find others they can trust. You may want to use the following prompt to start the process:

Look around you. Think about someone you know who could help you build some trust in yourself and in others. Do you have a friend? A relative? A teacher? A mentor? Someone at church? As you think about various people, ask yourself these questions:

- * Will this person respect my confidences and not laugh at me or tell others?
- * Will this person listen to me and be empathic - see things from my point of view?
- * Will this person give me suggestions I can have confidence in?
- * Will this person help me over time so that my trust becomes stronger

Now, why might a person not develop trust early in life? The main reason would probably be that you did not have your needs met. Maybe no one fed you, no one cuddled you, no one came when you were afraid. And if you tried to communicate by crying for help, you may have been ignored or even hit. You may have learned that you could not trust your family, yourself or the world. This would mean that you would feel vulnerable to whatever harm came your way. And feelings of vulnerability can make you feel sad, upset, and angry. Not being able to trust in your early years may also have caused you to develop certain ways of dealing with the world. You may be the kind of person who . . .

* Tries to control others. If you felt that you could not trust anyone to be loving or helpful, you may have come to see everyone as dangerous and potentially hostile. You may have felt that to keep them from harming you, you needed to control them. If you can control them, they cannot harm you, and trust, then, is irrelevant.

* Withdraws from human interaction. The reason for this reaction is to feel safer and less threatened by a world that cannot be trusted. You may have become self-reliant and avoided getting involved emotionally, rejecting efforts of others to develop any meaningful relationship

* Does not try to develop personal talents and abilities. If you feel that you cannot trust yourself to achieve, then you may try to protect yourself from what you see as inevitable failure. You may have let others do things for you, becoming dependent. You may allow yourself to be manipulated because you feel certain that others are better than you are, know more, and are the most likely to protect you.

While you may have felt that these approaches kept you safe, they actually made it impossible for you to trust. And, learning to trust others and yourself is an important part of being able to cope with the problems you have in life. You do not need to feel sad or angry or so vulnerable if you have trusting relationships. You are not alone.

Building Block #2: Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as independence or freedom - the ability to make your own decisions. Your autonomy began to develop when you were about 2 years old, and it has been critical throughout your life. You first began to be autonomous when you recognized that you were separate from those around you and that you had some power over others. Saying "No!" was perhaps your first use of that power. This autonomy was the second building block of your resilience, and was accompanied by a sense of independence. But it also brought new responsibilities, especially for your own behavior. You began to develop some idea of right and wrong, and to feel a sense of guilt if you did something considered wrong, like hitting another person.

Helping Youth Develop Autonomy

An important part of building resilience in youth is helping them develop their autonomy and independence. Here are some suggestions for engaging them in the process:

* Introduce the concept that it is okay to make mistakes and that you can learn from your mistakes.

* Let youth know that everyone fails at something, and that failure can be a source of new knowledge. Share with them stories of famous individuals who experienced early failure before they became successful.

* Reinforce the idea that mistakes are nothing to be ashamed of by fostering an environment that encourages risk-taking and mistake-making.

You also made many mistakes as you tried to do things on your own. And the way adults around you - especially your parents reacted to your mistakes determined how autonomous and independent you would become. If you were not allowed to make mistakes or were criticized harshly for the ones you made, you would have been tempted to give up on becoming autonomous. You may have felt ashamed and began to doubt your abilities. These feelings could make you sad, upset, and angry. Sometimes these feelings continue for many years.

Building Block #3: Initiative

Initiative is the ability and willingness to take action. Your initiative began to develop around the ages of 4 and 5, when you started to think and do things on your own. At this age, you may have started all kinds of projects or activities that you did not or could not finish. But whether or not you succeeded was not important. It was the willingness to try that was so important to building initiative. Creative ideas in art and science, new inventions, and problem-solving in every area of life require initiative. When you face adversity in your life, you are in a strong position to deal with it if you are able to take the initiative for finding creative responses.

Sometimes things get in the way of your developing initiative, however. If you were stopped or criticized too many times when you started a project or activity, you may have felt guilty for bothering people or naughty for making a mess of things. If you have experienced too much rejection from those you wanted to help, you may have felt unworthy of having your help accepted. Eventually, you may have stopped wanting or trying to take the initiative in anything. You may have become passive and uninvolved because you believed rejection and failure were inevitable. These feelings are another basis for becoming sad, upset, and angry.

Helping Youth Develop Initiative

When you see an excessive passivity and lack of involvement in the youth you work with, you may want to help them take initiative in some of the following ways:

* Have a youth reach out for someone to help solve a problem he or she is having, like failing a subject in school. Have the two work together to brainstorm about the problem and use the following steps to find a solution:

1. Identify the problem and describe it in words. (Sometimes we really do not know what the problem is, but you can take the initiative in describing what you think it is and asking for the thoughts of the other person.)
2. Discuss alternative solutions to the problem.
3. Modify the solutions, as a result of the conversations, or come up with new, creative ones.
4. Take action. Put the solution to the test.
5. Judge the outcome and discuss it further with the other person.
6. Make changes if needed, or just add the effective solution to your problem-solving bag.

* Have youth take the initiative in doing something they enjoy. Suggest ways that they could do this, such as starting a group art project, a band, or an after-school basketball game. If they are afraid of failing at something, help them find non-threatening, "safe" ways to take initiative at first.

* Have youth take the initiative in helping others. For example, they might try organizing a campaign to help some people who have just experienced a flood or volunteering at a hospital or community program for the homeless. On a smaller scale, they might just try reaching out to a classmate or a friend who is having trouble.

Building Block #4: Industry

Industry is defined as working diligently at a task. Most people develop industry during their school years, up to their teens. During these years, your attention has been focused on mastering skills, both academic and social. These skills are critical to promoting your resilience so that you have the tools to deal more effectively with experiences of adversity. It is also during the later years of this developmental stage that you become able to promote your own resilience.

If you were unable to succeed in mastering academic and social skills, you may have felt inferior and become extremely sensitive to your limitations. Perhaps you were teased, bullied, or excluded from a group. All of these things can add to feelings of inferiority, which can lead to feelings of unhappiness, frustration, and anger. You may have started to withdraw from others or become a troublemaker just because you were so frustrated and angry.

Helping Youth Develop Industry

Those who work with youth can help them develop industry in their lives, especially if they have experienced failure either academically or socially. Here are a few suggestions you may want to share with the youth:

- * Draw on your autonomy and independence. Use them to help you do your work, complete tasks, ask questions when something is not clear, assume responsibility for your work, and feel proud of your achievements.

- * Develop cooperation. Look around you and see whom you can work with comfortably. Cooperation also suggests you can resolve conflicts in decision making and in actions taken. Not only can you apply the problem-solving steps for developing initiative to the problems related to a project, but you can also apply them to the inevitable conflicts that group work engenders.

- * Improve your communication. To communicate effectively, you need to have the words to communicate with. Do you have the words to describe your feelings? Do you recognize and label your feelings? When you do not have these words, all of your emotions tend to fuse into one feeling: anger. You will want to build up a vocabulary to express your thoughts and feelings with your classmates.

- * Practice being assertive. Because you are your own person, you will want to state clearly what you believe and what behavior you will and will not accept from others. Remember: you have your values and you live by them. Others need to respect that in you.

- * Learn to listen. Though it may sound simple, listening is actually a difficult skill to master. There is so much stimulation, so much noise that it is hard for anyone to listen to another person. Also, you may be so overwhelmed with your own thoughts and feelings that you cannot wait to express them.

Building Block #5: Identity

The fifth building block of your resilience is identity, and it corresponds to your development during your teen years. When you are developing your identity, the major questions that are most likely on your mind are:

- * Who am I?
- * How do I compare to other teens?
- * What are my new relationships with my parents?
- * What have I accomplished?
- * Where do I go from here?

When you answer these questions to your satisfaction, you show skills in monitoring your own behavior, comparing your behavior with accepted standards, being helpful and supportive of others, using fantasy to make dreams come true, and recognizing the role of idealism in thinking and planning. If you are not able to do these things, you may become self-doubting and unsure of who you really are. You may feel that no one understands you, including yourself. You may be totally confused about how to behave and about your role in life. These insecurities can lead to feelings of sadness, frustration and anger.

Helping Youth Develop Identity

Those of you who work with youth may need to help them determine and develop a sense of identity, especially if they have previously experienced failures, disappointments, and negative feelings in dealing with this building block. Here are some suggestions critical to helping them develop their identity and the related resilience:

* Help them maintain family ties. It may be tempting for youth to think about breaking family ties so that they have more freedom and can listen to peers instead. However, it is much more productive and healthy to maintain these ties, while making certain changes in the relationships. Talk with youth about their need for more privacy, their desire to have their ideas taken more seriously, and their desire to help negotiate some of the rules of behavior. Help them find ways to discuss these new needs with their families.

* Help them come to terms with their tendency to get involved in overly stimulating activities. Most young people like excitement, new experiences, and risk-taking behavior. This is part of being a teen. However, it can become self-destructive, and teens need to be made aware of this potential danger. Suggest that youth seek out friends to engage in activities that are exciting and fun, but not self-destructive. These friendships can help them avoid boredom while improving social skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

* Help them develop some good social and problem-solving skills. The social skills needed include making friends who challenge in constructive ways; learning how to listen; and learning how to express anger, disappointment, disagreement, and empathy.

* Work on long-range planning. Young people need to plan not only for tomorrow, but for the long term. Have them consider their options and identify who could help them with their long-

range planning. Have them anticipate the adversities they will probably face - lack of money, not meeting qualifications, having the wrong courses to take certain subjects - and adjust their plans to address those adversities. For example, they might take fewer courses while they work, borrow money from their family, or build up their qualifications by night classes or reading.

While there is no guaranteed antidote to feelings of powerlessness and depression, the five building blocks have proven effective in fostering and strengthening resilience. As such, they are teammates in facing, overcoming, and being strengthened or even transformed by experiences of adversity. They work.

Edith H. Grotberg, Ph.D., is the director of the International Resilience Project at the Civitan International Research Center, UAB. The author of *Tapping Your Inner Strength* (1999, New Harbinger Publications), she is the managing editor of the mental health publication for the media, *Dialogue*, and has received the Excellence in Scientific Research Award from the Knowledge Utilization Society. She can be reached via e?mail at egrot@erols.com.

References

Erikson. E. (1985). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.

Grotberg. E. (1998). I AM. I HAVE, I CAN: What families worldwide taught us about resilience. *Reaching Today's Youth: The Community Circle of Caring* 1(3), 36-39.

Grotherg, E. (1999a). The International Resilience Research Project. In R. Roswith (Ed.), *Psychologists /acing the challenge of a global culture with human rights and mental health* (pp. 239-256).

Graz, Austria: Pabst Science Publishers, *Proceedings of the 55th Annual Convention, International Council of Psychologists*.

Grotberg, E. (1999b) *Tapping your inner strength*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Zwaigenbaum, L., Szatmari, P, Boyle, M., & Offord, D. (1999). Highly somatizing young adolescents and the risk of depression. *Pediatrics*, 103, 1203-1209.

<http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/library/grotb99.html>