Helping Young People Gain Resilience During the Pandemic

There are strategies parents and caregivers can use to help their kids gain greater resilience.

By Nancy Willard, Contributor  May 18, 2020

YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGHOUT the world are experiencing greater distress than usual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This toxic stress is a form of trauma.

Fortunately, there are strategies parents and caregivers can use to help their children gain greater resilience. Resilience is the ability to successfully respond to challenges and adversity.

When we feel stress or threats, our bodies prepare us to respond by increasing our heart rate, blood pressure and stress hormones, such as cortisol. These harmful effects can be buffered if young people are within an environment of supportive relationships and have effective competencies.

For young people to achieve greater resilience in times of adversity requires supportive relationships with friends and adults, feelings of self-efficacy and personal control, the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to self-regulate when under stress, and sources of faith and hope for a better future.

Based on research, these strategies appear to be most helpful to achieving resilience.

[READ: Coping With Anxiety and Depression During the Coronavirus Pandemic.]
Two kinds of positive connections are important for your child: friends and trusted adults. Maintaining connections with several good friends can help your child to retain emotional balance and obtain support when they are experiencing distress. Maintaining contact with several trusted adults, including adults outside of your family, who they can talk to about how things are going is also of critical importance.

Help your child identify their most important friends and several trusted adults. Assist your child in developing a plan for how they can maintain consistent contact during the pandemic, primarily through telephone and social media. As social distancing guidelines ease somewhat, find ways your child can get together in person with friends and trusted adults, wearing masks and maintaining an appropriate physical distance.

Reach Out to Be Kind

The act of reaching out to be kind brings as many benefits to the one who is kind as to the one who received such kindness. Encourage your child to intentionally reach out to be kind to someone else at least five times a day. This can include being kind to someone in the family, sending a kind message or thought, and being kind to a pet. Encourage your child to journal about their acts of kindness or talk to you about their kind actions and the response from others.

Utilize Strengths

Help your child focus on their strengths and interests. What would your child like to learn or do while this pandemic has disrupted our lives?

The VIA Institute on Character presents 24 character traits that social science researchers from throughout the world agreed provide the foundation for human goodness across all cultures, nations and beliefs. Everyone has different strengths. On their website, adults and teens can complete a survey to find out what their top strengths are. Intentionally using one of your strengths every day can bring an increase in happiness.

You and your teenage child can complete the survey to find your top strengths. Then, both of you can intentionally use one of your strengths every day. Encourage your child to journal about their use of one of their strengths or talk about this together. Your family can each also pick a new strength you want to develop every day.

[ READ: Reviving the Family Meal During the Coronavirus Pandemic. ]

Focus on the Good
In the morning, ask your child to reflect on something good that happened the day before. Encourage your child to keep a gratitude journal. In the evening, talk about the good things that happened that day. Your child could also write a note of gratitude to someone.

**Be Mindful**

Practicing mindfulness in a consistent manner is the best way to reduce the excess cortisol in your body and reduce stress. The basics of mindfulness meditation are simple. Sit quietly and ground yourself. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly, hold this briefly, then slowly breathe out. Be present.

Encourage your child to practice mindfulness several times a day. There are some good free apps you can download or meditation audios to listen to. You and your child can also engage in movement mindfulness by doing yoga.

**Keep Personal Power**

There are two aspects to this. One is physical presence. Maintaining a powerful physical presence can provide greater feelings of personal power. Remind your child to stand tall and walk with pride, especially when they are feeling down.

The second aspect of keeping your personal power is knowing that while we cannot control what happens, we can control how we feel about ourselves and respond. None of us can control what has happened in relation to this deadly virus. We do have the ability to control how we feel and to respond responsibly.

**Think Things Through**

A critically important aspect of feeling that you have personal control is knowing how to solve problems. To engage in effective problem solving, ask: What is the situation? What do I want to accomplish? What strategies could I use that use my strengths? Is each strategy in accord with my values? For each strategy, what might happen? What is the best first choice or choices? How should I proceed? Did this work? What else could or should I do?
Especially any time you and your child need to address a challenge or if you have to intervene with your child to correct any inappropriate behavior, collaboratively think things through to figure out what to do.

[READ: What Parents Should Know About Teen Depression.]

Try the 20-Second Hand-Washing Resilience Strategy

Everyone is washing their hands more frequently. You and your child can implement this hand-washing resilience strategy: When you wash your hands, be mindful by taking deep breaths, holding and slowly releasing. As you are being mindful, think of something good that recently happened and feel the happiness throughout your body. Then, think of someone you care about and send a warm loving thought to this person. Rinse your hands, look at yourself in the mirror, stand tall and say, "I've got this."
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