

Label Survival of Past Adversity as a Strength

Many at-risk youth have endured difficult childhood experiences, including incidents of neglect, abuse, and trauma. These life experiences are often perceived by youth as signs of inadequacy and weakness, which can result in problematic symptoms, including depression, anxiety, self-injurious and suicidal behaviors, verbal and physical aggression, and eating disorders. In order to help prevent these dysfunctional reactions, SBI-13 highlights the strength associated with the survival of past adversity. This specific type of reframing highlights the fact that overcoming adversity in life can make you stronger as a person, not weaker. Helping youth gain more control over their past negative experiences through the use of a strengths-based interpretation can be empowering and reduce the risk problematic symptoms.

Educate Youth About Posttraumatic Growth

The negative effects of adverse childhood experiences are well documented (see Anda & Felitti, 2003, and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, cosponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego, www.cdc.gov/ace/index.htm). However, being exposed to childhood adversity does not mandate a lifetime of negative outcomes. In fact, childhood stress that is manageable appears to act as a protective factor that may enhance youths' ability to develop into more resilient adults (Charney, 2004; Cooper, Feder, Southwick, & Charney, 2007). The process is analogous to getting a vaccination, which triggers your immune system to develop antibodies to fight off future exposure to disease. Similarly, experiencing some adversity in life can actually help inoculate you so you are not overwhelmed by future stressors. Even incidents in which individuals are exposed to unmanageable stress and adversity can result in some positive outcomes. In addition to the resiliency research, researchers have been studying what is referred to as "posttraumatic growth," "stress-related growth," or "benefit finding," defined as the positive outcomes youth experience in the aftermath of traumatic events (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Frazier & Berman, 2008; Frazier et al., 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Studies have identified several positive outcomes and areas of growth in the aftermath of adverse events, including the following:

- *Changes in one's sense of self.* Positive changes in one's sense of personal strength and maturity.
- *Changes in relationships.* Increased closeness to others.
- *Changes in spirituality or life philosophy.* Changes in life priorities, greater appreciation for life and living life in more fulfilling ways.
- *Changes in empathy.* Enhanced empathy and sensitivity toward others.

- *Changes in coping skills.* Enhanced confidence and ability to cope with life stressors.

As youth age and acquire more abstract thinking and executive functioning skills, their capacity to look back and reassess their childhood experiences is much greater. They are better able to correct childhood misperceptions and understand how their past adversity can strengthen them. Benefit-finding and positive reappraisal are coping strategies in which individuals attempt to look on the brighter side of things (Helgeson et al., 2006). These strategies have been linked to less depression and greater positive well-being, including more positive affect, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Affleck and Tennen (1996) explain, “Adversity can lose some of its harshness through cognitive adaptations—including finding the good in bad events—which can restore comforting views of ourselves, other people, and the world. These adaptations can even nourish the conviction that we are in some ways better off than we were before” (p. 900).

It is important to note that the study of positive changes following adversity is still young and providers should be cautious about how deliberately they intervene, as opposed to using nondirective interventions in response to growth that spontaneously occurs (Joseph & Butler, 2010).

Case Example: Viewing Adversity as a Strength, Not a Weakness

Jim (age 15) had a long history of disruptive and self-injurious behaviors. He had coped with significant adversity in life, including sexual and physical victimization, the suicide of his father, and his mother’s poor health and incarceration for drug possession and distribution. He received very little recognition for his positive attributes and viewed his life adversity as a weakness. Jim struggled with feelings of insecurity, depression, anger, and hopelessness. He was chronically on suicide watch and was regularly having conflicts with peers and staff.

I began meeting regularly with Jim to establish a positive relationship. I empathized with Jim about his feelings of unfairness that he had to cope with so much more than most people do in a lifetime. I began highlighting Jim’s strengths, including his ability to cope with so many stressors. I introduced Jim to the concepts of resiliency and posttraumatic growth. We talked about how his past adversity could strengthen his ability to cope with future stressors, pointing out that after all he had faced in life, it seemed there was little he could not handle. He began reading books about people who overcame adversity in life. I showed my admiration for Jim by making a general statement that when I compare my childhood experiences to his experiences, I felt like a real

wimp. Jim jokingly called me Dr. Wimpy. Jim began to understand that his ability to cope and survive such difficult life circumstances was a strength, not a weakness or something to feel ashamed about.

As Jim began to take pride in his ability to cope with such difficult life circumstances, his behaviors became more stable and his outlook on life more positive. I lost touch with Jim after he left the facility, but approximately one year later I was walking down the hallway and heard someone say, “Hey, Dr. Wimpy.” It was Jim, with a smile on his face; he was temporarily back at the facility awaiting his parole hearing. Jim was learning to take pride in his ability to overcome life adversity with the use of humor, knowledge about posttraumatic growth and resiliency, and strengths-based reframing.