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resilience

overcoming  
challenges and  
moving on  
positively

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ajungniq centre

Resilience: Overcoming Challenges and Moving On Positively

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ISBN: 978-0-9783246-6-7

Author: Marja Korhonen, PhD, Ajunnginiq Centre

Translator: Norman Keenainak

QAAPH [now known as the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)] receives funding from Health Canada to assist it to undertake knowledge-based activities including, education, research and dissemination of information to promote health issues affecting Aboriginal persons. However, the contents and conclusions of this report are solely that of the authors and not attributable in whole or in part to Health Canada.

### Ajunnginiq Centre

The Ajunnginiq Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization shall promote practices that will restore a healthy Inuit lifestyle and improve the health status of Inuit, through research and research dissemination, education and awareness, human resource development, and sharing information on Inuit-specific health policies and practices.

The Ajunnginiq Centre's five main areas of focus are to:

- Improve and promote Inuit health through knowledge-based activities;
- Promote understanding of the health issues affecting Inuit;
- Facilitate and promote research and develop research partnerships;
- Foster participation of Inuit in the delivery of health care; and,
- Affirm and protect Inuit traditional healing practices.

Ajunnginiq Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization

220 Laurier Ave. West, Suite 1200

Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5Z9

Tel: (613) 237-9462

Toll-free: 1-877-602-4445

Fax: (613) 237-8502

E-mail: [inuit@naho.ca](mailto:inuit@naho.ca)

Website: [www.naho.ca/inuit](http://www.naho.ca/inuit)



National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)  
Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)  
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# resilience

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## Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise noted, the quotes from Inuit Elders are from the transcripts of focus interviews done by the Ajunnginiq Centre in Inuvialuit Region, Nunavut, Nunavik and Labrador in 2004–2005. The results of the focus group meetings were edited and published in a report by the National Aboriginal Health Organization, *Suicide Prevention: Inuit Traditional Practices that Encouraged Resilience and Coping*, in 2006.

Thanks to Richard Kouri for his thoughtful and helpful contributions.



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## executive summary

Resilience means the ability to move through difficulties and maintain hope, mental wellness and positive coping methods. Highly resilient people are even often able to become stronger after difficult situations, because they develop confidence in themselves and learn new coping skills.

Modern science and the Inuit Elders' knowledge tells us that resilience is based on several factors:

- Biological and inborn personality factors.
- Environmental influences.
- The way we think about events and ourselves.

People who are naturally resilient seem to have certain inborn personality characteristics that influence how they view problems and how they solve them. Important personality qualities that affect resilience include:

- Optimism—the belief that problems can be solved and things will get better.
- Independence—being able to make decisions and act on your own, without always having to depend on someone else to tell you what to do.
- An inner sense of control and responsibility—believing that you yourself can do something to change a bad situation.
- The ability to form positive relationships with others.
- The ability to learn new coping skills, new ways of thinking, etc.

*“Some have a lot of strength and faith in themselves, and others have no strength in themselves and look at their problems as the end of the world.” (Elder from Repulse Bay)*

The situations we live in also influence our ability to cope and grow stronger. Important positive environmental factors include:

- Strong positive relationships that provide ongoing support, listening, belief in our ability, kindness and caring—this caring support can be from family or from someone else, such as a relative, friends, or a teacher.
- High expectations—this means that important people in our lives believe we can learn well and behave well, and they help us to work hard at becoming competent.
- Opportunities to get involved in positive ways with others—helping other people, participating in the community, etc.
- Opportunities to learn the skills and knowledge that develop self-esteem and enable us to be a productive member of the community.



“They are never to be discouraged about what they can or cannot do. They will always feel better about their life if they are encouraged. They will always try harder then, to exceed their expectation.” (Elder from Repulse Bay)

A very important part of resilience is the ability to think in positive ways even in very stressful situations. Elders say we should ‘look for the brighter side.’ Resilient people are able to:

- Find some positives in their lives even when things are going badly.
- Change negative thoughts to more positive ones.
- See rejection or failure as a learning experience.
- Find some humour when things go wrong.
- Focus on ways of having a more positive future rather than thinking of the bad things in the past.
- Understand that bad times will pass.

“If I have terrible thoughts or negative thoughts, then I won’t have a long life at all.” (Lucassie Nutaraaluk)

We help children and youth develop resilience when we:

- Do and say things that show them we truly care about them—“*Tell them they are important... then really listen to them.*” (Elder from Hopedale)
- Provide opportunities to learn important things, and encourage achievement even if it is difficult—“*If we see our children not doing well at school... what we should do is look for any improvement. We should tell them, ‘Please keep on learning. If you persist, your grades will get better.’ If they hear that, then they will start believing they are good and can do it.*” (Uqsaraalik Ottokie)
- Teach the importance of kindness, responsibility, understanding, and helping—“*Please be nice. Help the Elders at every opportunity you get, so your life will be very rewarding.*” (Naqi Ekho)
- Demonstrate and teach good social skills and communication skills—“*Tell them to treat each other well; then they will not have too many problems with others....If they see older people doing the right things about problems, they will see how it is done correctly.*” (Elder from Hopedale)
- Teach decision-making and problem-solving—“*When someone is very depressed, to reach them is to be very open and kind....As you go along,*





*they will start to realize what decision they have to make and we can help them. You have to support them and cannot come to a decision [yourself]; you help them and let them talk and as time goes on...they can come to a decision with our support.”* (Elder from Kangihsualujjuaq)

- Help them see their own strengths—*“You have to praise any accomplishments....That is what is going to lead him through life, what he hears about himself.”* (Alasi Joamie)
- Teach and demonstrate how negative thoughts can be changed to more positive ones—*“Take the time to show them how to live better, how to think differently to have a better life.”* (Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)
- Help them learn that they can control and influence their future—*“If you keep complaining and thinking about the one who broke your heart or what the person did to break it, you will always be heartbroken. But when you decide that you will no longer think about it, it will become the past and no longer bother your future.”* (John Aglukark, a youth from Arviat)
- Encourage them to feed their spirit—getting peace by going on the land, or getting involved in church and God, or being helpful and kind to others, etc.

Each of us, even as adults, can develop resilience by:

- Building a support system by connecting to others who are positive and caring role models.
- Paying attention to our thoughts and changing them to more positive ones.
- Helping others and participating in positive events in the community.
- Identifying our own strengths and building on them.
- Learning new knowledge, new skills, new coping methods, new ways of looking at situations, etc.

There are many problems in people’s lives and in communities. However, there are also many people who have faced great difficulties and traumas, but have survived. In fact, many have become even stronger as they faced and overcome their challenges. These people are role models for us, whether they are Elders, youth, middle-aged adults, or even children. Science is now identifying the factors that create resilience, but Inuit traditionally have been using similar strategies.

*“Life is short and [we] have to try to make up our minds to find things to do and be happy.”*

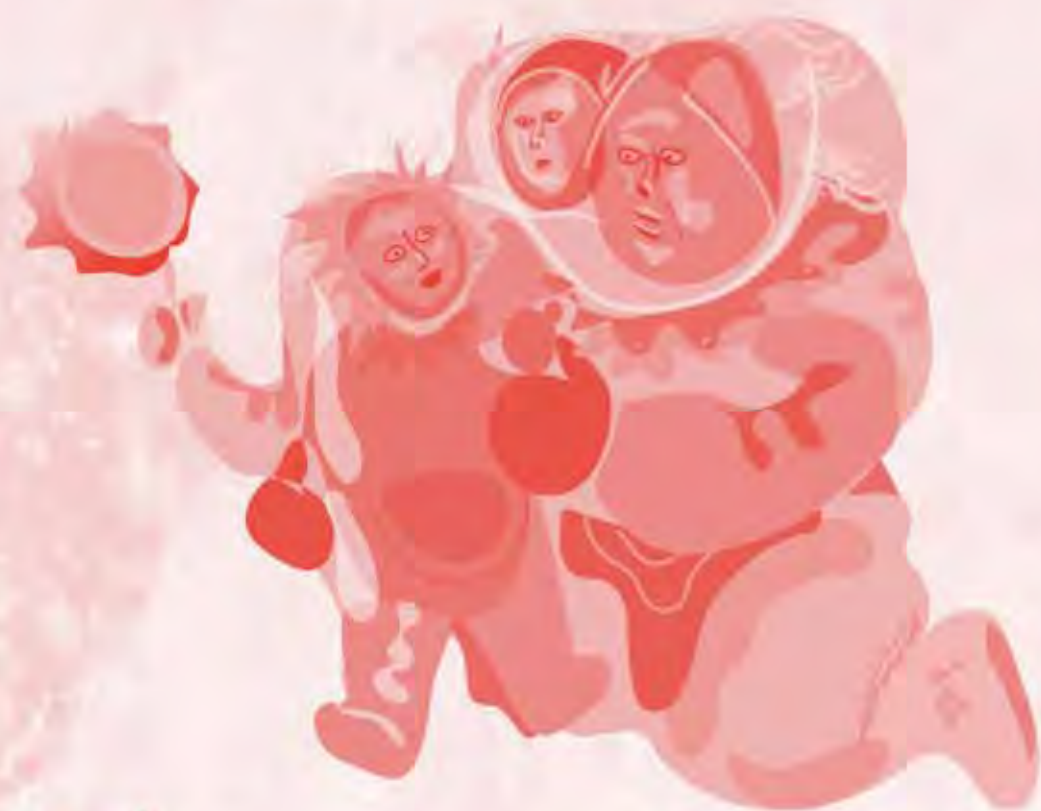
(Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)





“You are going to live through  
hard times, difficulties.... [We]  
were told never to give up...”

(Elder from Kangiqsualujjuaq)



# introduction

# introduction

*“We cannot be surprised when hard times come to us. We have to know how to face problems and get through them. We can’t lose our way when we have worries; we have to keep ourselves calm and steady. We can’t let ourselves get scared or down. We need our energy to solve the problems, not to get too down about them.”* (Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)

What this Elder is talking about is resilience. Resilience is the ability to keep, regain and build hope, emotional wellness, and positive ways of coping through times of difficulties in life.

Why are some people able to cope and carry on under high stress and many difficulties, even when terrible tragedies and events happen in their lives, while others become overwhelmed, helpless and hopeless, even in situations that may seem quite manageable to other people?

Resilience involves several elements:

- **Attitude:** the way we view life, problems, our own abilities and strengths, etc.
- **Coping strategies:** how we handle problems, stressful situations and negative emotions.
- **Adaptability:** the ability to change our behaviour, thinking, expectations, etc. when it is necessary.

People who are resilient are able to believe that although bad things and distressing feelings can happen, they can be overcome. They also have belief in their own ability to handle difficult situations. They have developed a variety of positive ways of dealing with problems. They are able and willing to learn or try new actions and new ways of thinking. Resilient people are often even stronger after difficult times, because they have learned new or better ways to cope and have developed even more faith in themselves.

Inuit Elders stress that traditionally, children were taught from an early age that life will often be difficult but that difficulties will pass or can be overcome.



“You could pull yourself [out of bad feelings or negative behaviour] by saying ‘I shouldn’t be like this.’ That is supporting yourself. It cannot always go on in a bad way, and I say that to myself. ‘I should not go on in this way.’” (Elder from Kangiqsualujuaq)

A person’s ability to carry on positively in spite of difficult times, tragedies or traumas is influenced by:

- personality characteristics.
- thinking patterns.
- skills.
- family situation and attitudes.
- role models.
- community support systems.
- positive opportunities.
- expectations.
- learning.

Much has been written about the causes and risk factors of hopelessness, helplessness, depression, suicide, low self-esteem, violence, alcohol problems, and other issues. However, it is necessary to understand what **protects** people from being overwhelmed and beaten down by difficult situations. What makes it possible for them to cope and carry on in positive ways? **The focus of this discussion paper will therefore be on those factors that make it more likely that a person will be able to cope successfully with the many stresses and difficulties that we encounter in life, even very damaging and traumatic experiences. It will also discuss how we can help ourselves and others develop the ability to cope and grow stronger.**





“Talk to each other when you are in crisis, which is like bad weather. When you talk to another about things, it starts to feel like good weather.”

(Elder from Kangiqsualujjuaq)



**what the  
evidence  
shows**

## what the evidence shows

Most people who are resilient seem to have certain similar personal qualities and strengths, similar thought patterns and similar life experiences that have helped them develop a sense of hopefulness, confidence and competence.

Research has shown that genetics—inborn characteristics—is one factor in resilience. Some people are born with personality qualities that make them more capable of dealing with difficulties.

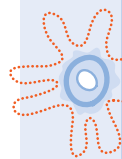
Resilient individuals also have strengths, attitudes and skills that enable them to manage better in their lives and cope better with adversity. All societies generally agree on certain basic factors that are necessary for health and strength:

- Forming good relationships.
- Not harming others or oneself.
- Contributing in positive ways to family, work, community and friends.
- Doing those things that enable mental and physical health for oneself and others (Petersen and Seligman, 2004; Topping, Holmes and Bremner, 2006).

The details and specific behaviours may be different in different cultures and groups, but for all humans, these factors seem to be essential for holistic personal and social wellness.

Body chemistry and brain function also play a role. Certain hormones and brain chemicals affect our feelings and thoughts. For example, some make us feel hopeful; others contribute to feelings of sadness and depression. Emotions then affect behaviour. For example, if we are feeling happy and confident we will behave differently than we do when we are feeling depressed or frightened. Genetics, substance use, physical health, nutrition, prenatal events, and environmental events can all have an influence on these biological factors. Brain function and brain chemistry may also influence personality development.

Environmental influences are an extremely important factor in resilience. Our life experiences, family attitudes and models, support systems, and connections to others all contribute to the way we cope with problems. We develop emotional strength and problem-solving skills when we observe that problems can be solved, when others make us feel loved and capable, and when we have chances to learn new things and to accomplish goals.



Another very important factor is our thoughts and beliefs. The way we interpret or think about a situation or event has a very big influence on our emotions, behaviour and ability to cope. For example, if a relationship breaks up, one person may believe s/he is unlikable and will never find love, and may feel depressed and worthless. Another person may think, 'This didn't work but I know I'll find someone better eventually.' S/he may feel sad but will move on with self-esteem and hope.

The next section explains more about the things that influence resilience.

## personal characteristics

Research shows that certain personality characteristics have an important influence in whether or not a person is able to cope with problems positively.

Personality means the kind of person we are. Personality becomes obvious from the way we *usually* think, feel and act in life. (I emphasize the word 'usually' because we do not behave exactly the same way all the time.) For example, a person may usually be nervous in new situations or with new people. Another person may usually be sociable, joking and willing to try new things. We all vary in different circumstances (for example, the quiet nervous person may be very relaxed and funny when s/he is with friends), but each person seems to have a set of general basic mental and behavioural characteristics (scientists call these *traits*) that can describe what s/he is like. You might describe your best friend, for example, as friendly and outgoing, dependable, having a good sense of humour, confident, and kind. Those are your friend's general personality traits.

Science shows that we seem to be born with some basic personality characteristics that tend to be quite steady throughout our lives.<sup>2</sup> Parents often talk about observing differences in their children's personalities from the time they are babies. For example, the active curious baby who is never afraid of anyone or anything is more likely to grow up to be an outgoing adult who doesn't mind being the centre of attention and is first in line to try some challenging activity. A quiet baby who doesn't like changes in routine and withdraws from new people at first is more likely to become an adult who prefers to stand back and think about situations before getting involved.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Although research is ongoing and there is still much to learn about personality development, more and more research also shows that the range of personality qualities is similar among all people, regardless of culture (Comeau, Mushquash and Stevens, 2005; McCrae and Costa, 1997; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Terraciano, Abdel-Khalek and others, 2005; and others).

3. It is important to remember that personality development is also affected by environmental experiences. For example, if parents gently encourage naturally shy children to take part in new situations, the child can learn to be less anxious.

Certain personality qualities seem to protect a person from being overwhelmed when painful or difficult events happen. These protective qualities make it more likely that the person will be able to cope.

One very important protective quality is optimism. Optimism means hope and confidence—the belief that positive things will happen, that problems can be overcome and that whatever is wrong will eventually get better. Optimistic people are able to look at problems as being temporary, and they have the attitude that they can do something to change the bad situation. They do not see themselves as helpless, worthless or incapable. Instead, they can think of the situation as a challenge, and they believe that they have, or can learn, the skills to make things better. As an Elder from Repulse Bay said, “Some people have a lot of strength and faith in themselves, and others have no strength in themselves and look at their problems as the end of the world.”

Research shows that optimistic people do better in all areas of life. They are more successful at the things they try because they do not give up easily. They are not depressed as often, and have more effective ways of dealing with stress. They are more willing to try new things and develop new ways of thinking and doing things.

Optimism can even contribute to a longer life and better health. Long-term studies from different parts of the world about old people show that they usually have an optimistic attitude, even when they have experienced traumatic events in their lives. An optimistic attitude seems to protect against the high levels of stress which have a negative effect on many areas of physical and mental health (Suzuki, M. and others, 2006; Boston University, 2006; and others).

Some people seem to have a natural, inborn tendency to view life and problems optimistically and to try making things better. That natural hope and confidence is then made even stronger by their positive experiences.

However, optimism is also learned. One way we learn is through observation and experience. When people see that problems can be solved, and that they themselves can find ways to deal with difficulties, our confidence increases and stress and depression decrease. Another way of becoming more optimistic is by learning to change the way you think about yourself, events and other people.

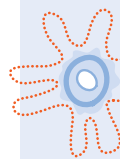
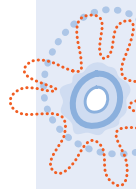




Elisapee Ootoova (Oosten and Laugrand, 1999) in discussing her own life and personality, talks about these kinds of innate personality characteristics:

“Even though this seems painful, when I was a child, my feelings were not easily hurt....I do not know why these things did not make me give up. I was often dealt with in a negative way, would be told that I was not good at making anything. Yet I would start to think that I’d like to do better. We are all taking different journeys, and I am the type of person who doesn’t just lie back....I do not know why I walked that path.... My older sister who was next to me wasn’t like that... we were treated equally.

...[When I was helping with the dogs] I would tag them fast. My oldest brother would hit me. It’s painful when you are hit like this and punched like this, but I would abstain from crying so I could tease later again. That was probably why I was told I didn’t take things seriously, as I tended to tease everybody. And when I learned songs from our camp visitors, I would sing them a lot. I guess that’s why people didn’t like me either. I was the type of person who didn’t heed what I was told. [For example] We were often reminded







*“Talk to each other when you are in crisis, which is like bad weather. When you talk to another about things, it starts to feel like good weather.”*

(Elder from Kangiqsualujjuaq)

*“[She] asked him not to think about it all the time and try to get out in public and try to enjoy life as much as he can....[He] now knows if there were games or feasts or dances, he never remembers what he was stressed about, when he’s in public. So elders used to ask us to try and have as much fun as possible.”*

(Elder from Repulse Bay)

Intelligence is an important factor. Intelligence means our **potential** to learn, think and adapt our behaviour to different circumstances. To a large extent, we are born with a potential for learning and thinking—some have the potential to be geniuses, others will be average, others will be slower to learn because of factors such as genetic differences, chromosome abnormalities or prenatal brain damage. Potential intelligence can also be affected by environmental conditions, especially in early childhood. For example, very poor early childhood nutrition affects early brain development and the ability to learn and think. On the other hand, good nutrition, loving physical contact and a variety of interesting and challenging experiences for babies and young children helps the brain develop and makes it more possible for the individual to reach his/her full intelligence potential. Higher levels of intelligence enable a person to acquire more knowledge, use that knowledge more effectively and think about and analyze experiences. These are important protective factors in resilience.





## the brain and resilience

Modern science is helping us learn more and more about how biological processes such as brain structure and brain chemicals affect and influence how we think, feel and act. Certain parts of the brain and body produce and react to chemicals. Some chemicals act as natural tranquilizers or relaxers; others are involved when we feel happy and confident; still others create feelings of anxiety or fear. Under stressful conditions, especially, chemicals that create or contribute to anxiety and fear are produced by the brain and body. (These stress chemicals also affect physical health).

Some people, even when they experience very stressful situations in which they have no control, are able to remain mentally, physically and behaviourally healthy. Or if they do get depressed or suffer other stress-caused problems, they are able to return to health. Others become seriously depressed, develop stress-related physical problems or begin to use unhealthy methods of trying to cope (for example, violence, alcohol or drugs) even in situations where they have some control. Some of these differences are caused because people may have an inborn tendency to a certain chemical makeup. Other times, environmental factors influence body chemistry. Although much more research is necessary before we fully understand the processes, it seems that biological factors are definitely involved in the ability to cope (World Health Organization, 2004).

Modern medicine is developing new drugs that can help to balance the chemicals that create emotions. However, medicine is not the only way to change brain chemistry. There is much important evidence that behaviour and thoughts can change body chemistry and improve mental and physical health. Through practicing positive actions and thoughts, we can use “nature’s own antidote to illness” (Dugan, 2000, p. 66). Elders understood this, although the science was not yet known. As an Elder from Kangiqsualujjaq explains,

“As an example, I lost my first baby and I was grieving day and night....I asked myself, ‘What am I doing?’ I started telling myself I am not supposed to be grieving that much. It was too heavy on me. I started to grieve less, as I had been getting sick from grieving.”

By changing her thoughts, she improved her ability to cope and improved her mental and physical health. When we change to more positive ways of thinking or when we cope well with a difficulty, our body produces less of the anxiety chemicals and more of the chemicals that make us feel good. We feel better, more hopeful, more confident, and that enables us to cope even better. This is important because evidence also shows that as people learn better coping skills and more positive ways of thinking about a difficulty, they become more resilient, more able to handle hardship and stress physically and mentally.

## environmental influences

Although genetics and biology have a definite effect on resilience, that is only part of the picture. Life experiences and environmental influences, including some prenatal experiences, have crucial effects on our ability to cope. Environmental influences include such things as:

- Family situation.
- Relationships and support systems.
- Nutrition and health care.
- Social, cultural and community factors.
- Opportunities for involvement and accomplishment.

Some environmental experiences put us at greater risk of poor coping. Others protect against feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and build our inner strengths.

An important thing to remember about risk factors is that even if a person has had negative environmental experiences, it does not mean that s/he will definitely be overwhelmed by problems later on in life. For example, research shows that most people who have experienced childhood abuse or family alcoholism do not themselves become abusers or problem drinkers (Stout and Kipling, 2003). Humans can make choices about their lives, and many people are able to make good lives for themselves and cope with life's difficulties despite very difficult past experiences.

*“When children grow up in an abusive environment, some children tell themselves they don’t want to be like that and they follow through on this when they are adults.” (Uqsuraalik Ottokie)<sup>5</sup>*

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5. Briggs, 2000.





- No mental illness in parents.
- Detachment from their own parents' problems: the ability to separate themselves from whatever problems there were in their own childhood families (alcoholism, abuse, etc.).

“If we love our children and believe in them and show them we are positive, then they start believing that they can, that they can do anything... and that is how we are supposed to raise our own children to have a good solid mind....[And to make a child's mind strong] the best way to do this is through balanced discipline.... You need to be consistent with them. If you consistently show love and discipline, the child will grow nicely.” (Uqsuralik Ottokie)<sup>7</sup>

In a positive home atmosphere, parents also specifically teach their children how to cope in constructive ways with challenges and difficulties. Children are taught how to make good friendships, ways of dealing with arguments and conflicts, what to do in frightening situations, how to handle chores and tasks that are frustrating, how to handle emotions, etc. They are given guidelines and support as they work to meet the challenges.

“We were given tasks that were difficult so that we would be experienced by the time we were married, so that in times of hunger we could survive.... Boys had an even harder time, for they had to be able to provide for their wives and children after they grew

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7. Briggs, 2000.



A supportive relationship is one where the supporter:

- Believes in the person's potential and ability to do well: "I know you can..."
- Shows that they care for the person even if s/he does something wrong or fails at something or acts badly sometimes.
- Is willing to listen.
- Doesn't judge or 'label' the child (or his family).<sup>9</sup>
- Always provides encouragement.
- Provides constructive criticism and ideas when necessary, helping the person learn how they might do things differently next time.
- Is a role model who demonstrates healthy coping.

### high expectations

Research shows that high expectations lead to the sense of competence, belief in self and development of skills that are an essential part of resilience. Having high expectations about another person means that you believe they can cope well, do things right, be responsible, respect others, learn well, etc. However, you must provide help, support and guidance, and build realistically on each person's strengths.<sup>10</sup> And you must encourage and praise them at every step along the way.

There are very obvious negative statements like "You're not smart enough," or "Let me do it...You'll just do it wrong" that show low expectations and which will make a person feel incompetent, stupid, powerless, etc. But sometimes we may think it is helpful and kind to make excuses for others, or we don't ask them to do too much, because we're trying to be understanding. A teacher, for example, may believe that it is unfair to expect a child who comes from a troubled and deprived home to achieve and accomplish as much as other children. However, research shows that high expectations are necessary in order to learn and think to the best of one's potential; and accomplishing challenging goals builds confidence and self-esteem (Benard, 1991; Milstein and Henry, 2000).

9. Judgments and labels can be damaging even if they're intended to be helpful. For example, statements like "Your dad's an alcoholic" or "You're a victim of trauma" may be intended to explain or help someone feel better about the situation, but they may in fact create feelings of judgment, shame, helplessness, etc.

10. Expectations must be realistic: a young child cannot be expected to accomplish the same things as a teenager; a child with FASD may not be able to learn as much or think as well as other children the same age. But each one must be encouraged to do their best, accomplish more bit by bit.





“They are never to be discouraged about what they can or cannot do, they always will feel better about their life if they are encouraged. They will always try harder then, to exceed their expectation.”

(Elder from Repulse Bay)

It is important to remember that expectations must also be clear. We (children or adults) need to know exactly what is expected and what we need to do to reach that goal.

### **Involvement and helping**

Another important environmental protective factor is the opportunity to participate and contribute to others and the community. When people feel that they have a positive role in the life of their community and the lives of others, it builds connection, self-esteem and a sense of competence. Piliavin (2005) and other modern research has confirmed that we learn new skills, build stronger relationships and feel good by doing good. Science has also shown that getting positively involved with others creates positive brain chemistry: our brains produce more of the chemicals that make us feel good.

Elders, too, knew the positive effects of helping others and being involved:

“I said I was never going to smile again, when I lost someone. A woman came to be with me. My husband said to make her a pair of slippers, even though I didn’t want to. I did it anyway and that was a turning point. I bet that is something he knew from a long time ago.”

(Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)







“Prayer, faith and religion can be used to make more strength to get through any major problems in their life. Faith is one of the best ones to use as a tool, to make yourself and others feel better.” (Elder from Repulse Bay)

### the importance of thinking

“If I have terrible thoughts or negative thoughts, then I won’t have a long life at all.” (Lucassie Nutaraaluk)<sup>16</sup>

“The brain is very important because it controls everything.... The fact that you can change what is on your mind, makes me believe that the brain is the most important part of the body.” (Aalasi Joamie)<sup>17</sup>

Our thoughts and beliefs about events, people, the past, the future, ourselves, etc. have extremely important effects on how we cope with and recover from problems. Two different people can be in a similar difficult situation. One gets through it and manages to carry on well; the other falls apart and cannot pull him/herself back on track. Often, those two different reactions are based on their thoughts and interpretations about the experience and themselves.

Two Elders from Repulse Bay give excellent examples of how the way you interpret a situation can affect your feelings and behaviour. One talks about being unsuccessful on a hunt. He might have interpreted his poor hunting to mean, “I’m not a good hunter”. However, his mother helped him think about the situation from a different angle:

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16. Saladin d’Anglure, 2001.

17. Therrien and Laugrand, 2001.





“Try to see things brighter and go forward more.”

(Elder from Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“I tell them try to leave it in the past, try to forget about it and move forward in life.” (Elder from Repulse Bay)

“Life is short and they have to try to make up their minds to find things to do and be happy.”

(Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)

“Each day is different, things aren’t always the same.... Maybe the next day happy things will be happening.”

(Elder from Hopedale)

Much research around the world (Park, 2004) shows that a crucial factor in mental health is the ability to see positives even in negative events, to “look for the bright side” (Emile Imaruittuq)<sup>18</sup> as Elders stress.

“Try to remember the good things about people; they are not all bad. There are many things about them that we can see and we can like. We should not be against them for small things but try to get closer to them.”

(Elder from Hopedale)

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18. Oosten, Laugrand and Rasing, 1999.



“People have different strengths....Some have a lot of strength and faith in themselves, and others have no strength in themselves and look at their problems as the end of the world....For example, some people have a lot of strength dealing with bad weather or when they are out hunting or stuck with nothing to survive with. You could use what strength they have [in those situations] and measure with that one, if there are family problems or any other kind. Their strength could be measured with how they deal with it and how much they can handle.” (Elder from Repulse Bay)

The ability to think and learn is a factor in resilience.<sup>19</sup> Thinking and learning includes the following abilities:

- To understand oneself and others—what we are like, what we need, why we act and feel certain ways in various situations, etc.
- To analyze situations—what is happening, why it is happening, what is needed, what could be done, etc.
- To predict possible consequences—“what might happen if ...”
- To plan ahead—“This is what I can do if...” or “Next time, I’ll...”, etc.
- To figure out problem-solving methods—“What’s the best way...” or “That didn’t work. I’ll try this instead...”

“After I lost my husband, I turned to alcohol and did not eat and did not stop for seven or eight months. One night I had a beer, and looking at it and couldn’t

<sup>19</sup> Learning and thinking disabilities make it more likely that a person will have more difficulties coping when problems arise.





“The mind is very powerful in its control over us.”

(Elisapee Ootoova)<sup>20</sup>

“Yes, it is very hard for a person [to be talked about and criticized]. It causes one to be depressed. Then I thought, if they want to say this about me, let them. I didn’t let it bother me anymore.” (Victor Tungilik)<sup>21</sup>



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20. Oosten and Laugrand, 1999.

21. Oosten and Laugrand, 1999.



“Take the time to show them  
[children] how to live better,  
how to think differently to have  
a better life.” (Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)



**how  
resilience can  
be developed**

# how resilience can be developed

Although resilience is partly a result of personal characteristics and partly a result of our experiences in the world, we are not victims of genetics or environment. We can teach our children and others to become more resilient. We can change our personal reactions to problems, and we can overcome the negative effects of environment. Too often we believe, for example, that someone who has had a terrible childhood, or other traumatic experiences, is permanently hurt and will always have emotional or coping problems. The person may believe that about him/ herself too. However, we can learn to act, react and think in ways that will make it easier to overcome difficulties and carry on positively in our lives. Parents, teachers, community, and helpers can use and teach strategies that encourage the development of resilience.

There are two important points to remember. First, even people who are normally resilient may not be able to cope all the time and in every situation. Those who have deeply distressing backgrounds may have to try especially hard at times. “Resilience ebbs and flows. All survivors have vulnerable times, and none escapes the past totally unharmed” (Wolin and Wolin, 1993, p. 62). However, they can be helped to remember and use the strengths they have had in previous situations. Secondly, people do not necessarily use the strengths and resources they have available, even when they could. For example, Dumont and Provost (1999) found that young people, especially those who were at risk, did not necessarily use social support resources or ask for help even when they knew it was available. It may therefore be necessary to reach out to encourage and support even if a person does not ask.

The more times a person is able to cope successfully and carry on in a positive way, the easier and more natural it will become.

There are many things that parents, teachers, mentors, and professionals can do to encourage the development of resilience. The next section gives some examples of strategies that help develop resilient coping skills.

## **foster a sense of self-worth and competence**

Two major factors lead to self-esteem and a sense of competence:

- We feel we are valued by others.
- We are able to achieve goals that we want to accomplish.

There are many self-esteem development programs that focus on activities like telling oneself every day that “I am a loveable and capable person.” However, no self-esteem activity will work by itself unless the person has evidence that s/he in fact is loveable and capable. We only develop positive self-esteem when we are able to do things, including being able to be a likeable person. The achievements that create a sense of self-worth and competence give us more control and ownership over our lives.

*“Feelings of self-esteem in particular, and happiness in general, develop as side-effects—of mastering challenges, working successfully, overcoming frustration and boredom, and winning. The feeling of self-esteem is a by-product of doing well” (Seligman, 1995, p.33).*

*“There were no pencils. I’d never seen a pencil. I’d never seen anything to write on....[O]ur parents started reading to us children and we got the desire to learn to write. We tried to do better than our fellow children. We would practice writing on the frost in the winter... go where there was fresh-fallen snow and write on it.” (Rachel Uyarasuk)<sup>22</sup>*

Parents, teachers, friends, and important others can model, teach and provide opportunities for the experiences that enable self-esteem and competence:

**DEMONSTRATE LIKING, LOVE AND CARING THROUGH MEANINGFUL WORDS AND ACTIONS:**

- Pay attention to what they say and do.
- Notice and acknowledge when they do something that shows skill, humour, co-operation, kindness, effort and so on.
- Tell them you like them and are happy to be their friend/parent/teacher/aunt, etc.

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22. Oosten and Laugrand, 1999.

- Tell them **why** you like them—for example, because they are funny, helpful, curious, help you learn new things, always try hard, etc.—at the time when they are actually being/doing what you like about them.
- Spend time together doing enjoyable things.
- Talk with and listen to them, without criticising what they tell you.
- Set consistent rules and limits but discipline with love and understanding.
- Reach out when they seem troubled or frustrated.

*“Tell them they are important. Let them know you care about them....Let them know they are safe and in a good place to let it out. Then really listen to them.”*

(Elder from Hopedale)

**EMPHASIZE MEANINGFUL LEARNING AND ACCOMPLISHMENT:**

- Give appropriate learning tasks that are a challenge and require effort.
- Praise effort but also expect achievement.
- Give learning tasks that will develop the skills that will enable them to participate meaningfully in the world.
- Let them know by words and actions that you believe they can accomplish the task.
- Encourage persistence, which is the ability to stick with something rather than giving up.
- Teach how to set realistic goals.
- Provide opportunities for responsibility (for example, chores for children), expect responsible behaviour, and recognize/acknowledge when a person has been responsible.
- Be a role model of responsibility, optimism and problem-solving.
- Emphasize and value education and learning.
- Demonstrate and emphasize that we learn from mistakes: analyze what went wrong and what could be done differently next time.







“Tell them to treat each other well; then they will not have too many problems with others. Let them see you treating them well and they will treat others that way too. If they see older people doing the right things about problems they will see how it is done correctly.”

(Elder from Hopedale)

“If you don’t say something to them, then you will just not have expressed your thoughts....When we Inuit have someone we love, and we find their actions inappropriate, we need to tell them this. If we don’t say something to them, that’s not really love....If they got angry and thought they were being scolded, then you wondered how you could tell them in a better way.”

(Rachel Uyarasuk)<sup>25</sup>

**TEACH AND DEMONSTRATE DECISION-MAKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING:**

- Allow people, even children, to solve their own problems whenever it is appropriate, and praise or acknowledge it when they do it well.
- Provide choices, suggestions, ideas and strategies when necessary.
- Teach and provide opportunities for critical thinking skills and creativity.

“When someone is very depressed, to reach them is to be very open and kind to that person. As you go

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25. Oosten and Laugrand, 1999.



## teach constructive thought patterns

### THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR ARE CONNECTED

- Discuss how thoughts about a situation can lead to certain emotional and behavioural consequences. For example, if a person has a fight with a friend, s/he may think, 'Mary was nasty to me on purpose.' This could result in anger and doing things to get back at the friend, which will make the situation worse. If the belief is, 'Nobody likes me; I'll never have a good friend,' the consequence could be sadness and withdrawal. However, if the thought is, 'Well, she was in a bad mood. That's OK; we'll make up,' the result will be that you still feel good about her and yourself, and will do something to repair the friendship.
- Emphasize possible positives; look for the 'bright side': What did you learn? What good might come out of this?
- Help the person analyze their beliefs about a problem and develop a more realistic or positive way of looking at it.

*“Try and see what the problem is doing to the person, whether or not they can think straight. Try to share some of what you went through and how you did it.”* (Elder from Hopedale)

*“What I was seeing about some young people—they see their problems as too big. It is important to tell them, ‘it is not as big as you think. It can be fixed.’ I know that; I have been through it and can help you.”*

(Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)







**SENSE OF CONTROL AND BELIEF IN THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE EVENTS:**

- Provide activities where the person is able to control the outcome; discuss what they did to produce that outcome; relate to other possible situations.
- Encourage a focus on the present and future, rather than on the negatives of the past, which cannot be changed. What do they want for the future? What can they do, starting today, to make that future happen?

*“You have to force yourself to look ahead to the light to see a better future.” (Elder from Kangiqsualujuaq)*

*“If you keep complaining and thinking about the one who broke your heart or what that person did to break it, you will always be heartbroken. But when you decide that you will no longer think about it, it will become the past and no longer bother your future.” (John Aglukark)<sup>27</sup>*

**ACCEPTANCE OF THINGS THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED:**

*“The best advice to give myself—he is not going to return anymore and to accept that he is gone.”*

*(Elder from Repulse Bay)*

**spiritual connections**

Provide opportunities that feed the spirit. For some people, church and prayer are seen as the primary spiritual activities. However, there are many other activities that provide spiritual nourishment, emotional peace, and opportunities to practice and think about spiritual qualities like love, kindness, gratitude, sharing, and connectedness to the world. Examples of things that can provide spiritual nourishment include going out on the land, helping others and reading spiritual material.

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27. National Inuit Youth Council, 2006, p. 66.



who can overcome challenges in life and enjoy the good life” (Park, 2004). Good parenting, effective schooling, a variety of youth development programs, and healthy communities all contribute to this holistic wellness.

*“The child that had been disciplined tended to be a better person. They have been working on their character since childhood.” (Rachel Uyarasuk)<sup>29</sup>*

## examples of specific situations

### AT SCHOOL

Research shows that school “has become one of the most important settings for health promotion and preventive interventions among children and youth” (World Health Organization, 2004, p.30). The World Health Organization and other researchers say that school-based strategies at all grade levels have been shown to improve such protective factors as school achievement, problem-solving skills, and social skills, and to decrease depression, anxiety, aggression, substance abuse, etc.

Topping, Holmes and Bremner (2006) and the World Health Organization have reviewed many international school-based programs that focus on helping students develop the social skills, problem-solving skills, and belief in their own ability that are factors in resilience. Although more research is needed, the following strategies have been shown to be effective with at least some students:

- Holistic programs that develop a variety of skills and use a variety of strategies.
- A holistic focus on building a positive school climate (respect, responsibility, high expectations, achievement, etc.).
- Programs that develop new thinking patterns and improved thinking skills as well as strategies for managing own behaviour (for example, developing a plan for what you’ll do when angry).
- Peer programs, in which students help other students (tutoring, support, conflict-solving training, etc.)—peer programs have benefits for both the one who is helped and the helper.

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29. Oosten and Laugrand, 1999.



that will help the men resume life in their communities without violence and abuse. The program develops elements of resilience that will enable the men to cope more positively with difficulties and challenges:

- Changing thoughts and thinking patterns.
- Social values and pro-social skills.
- Management of emotions.
- Personal responsibility.
- Problem-solving strategies.
- Development of an individualized community support system.

#### **NUNAVUT EMBRACE LIFE COUNCIL**

The Nunavut Embrace Life Council<sup>30</sup> was set up to combat the high youth suicide rates in Nunavut communities. Council members include representatives from the RCMP, community volunteer organizations, government, Regional Inuit Organizations, education, youth organizations, and churches. The Council is based on the belief that effective suicide prevention must concentrate holistically on enhancing life, rather than on the narrower focus of preventing death. Individuals, family and communities must learn and use the skills, attitudes and activities that make it possible for youth to cope with difficulties and build a positive life.

The Council does not provide services and programs directly. Instead, they provide training, ideas, resources, and information to communities and groups. Communities can then set up services and programs appropriate to their own needs.

To help communities develop programs that build the necessary resilience skills and attitudes, the Council provides:

- Brochures on coping skills for youth.
- Information about good parenting skills.
- Workshops on how to use drama therapy to encourage communication and build skills.
- Ideas for ways in which adults and the community can connect with youth.
- Ideas for involving youth.
- Information about other organizations and materials that focus on wellness and resilience.

They also provide information and training for community organizations about how to get funds, etc. for training, programs and resources.

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30. For detailed information, contact Nunavut Embrace Life Council at (867) 975-3233.



“[When people were putting you down, saying bad things] it seems like the world is small and you are isolated....I used to try and cure myself by thinking, ‘They are not saying it to me,’ and that I have help from God. I started to feel less heavy and that is how I helped myself and didn’t need a lot of help from others.”

(Elder from Kangiqsualujjuaq)

“When I lost my 14-year-old grandchild, I thought I would never smile again. Then I started thinking—he let me have him for 14 years. I had my brother for over 30 years. Those are the things I should be thankful for, having them that long. I started to think about changing my mind and smile and pray....I am happy to be here with my friends and relatives now.”

(Elder from Tuktoyaktuk)





“...We have to be aware of our own abilities and know when to participate in what is happening....” (Cornelius Nutarag)



**discussion**

## discussion

There are many risk factors in Inuit communities today: alcohol abuse, family violence, physical/sexual/emotional abuse, neglect, limited employment opportunities and income, learning disabilities (including those related to FASD), low education levels, young parents with inadequate parenting skills and few support systems, etc. However, the negative effects of these risk possibilities can often be overcome. Research across many cultures shows that many children from even extremely difficult environments can succeed at life despite the most serious challenges (Werner and Smith, 2001; Masten, 1997; Grothberg, 1997; and others).

Resilience and coping grow when a person—child, youth or adult—is able to build the following qualities into their lives (Wolin and Wolin, 1993):

- **Insight:** the ability to understand ourselves, other people, and the situation we are in. For example, a child may learn to understand that his parents' violent behaviour is the result of their own problems, not because the child is 'bad'. An adult woman who suffered sexual abuse in her childhood can learn to understand how that experience has affected her behaviour in the present—and that she can choose to limit those negative effects and focus on more positive paths. A young man who has been in trouble with the law can learn to understand how his personality and background may have led to that—and how he can build on his strengths for a more positive future.
- **Independence:** the ability to make positive decisions and choose positive paths, rather than being too influenced and affected by other people and negative environments.
- **Relationships:** the ability to make trusting and caring connections with other people. If a positive relationship is not possible within the family, we must look for mentors such as teachers, Elders, other relatives, and friends who have built positive lives, etc.
- **Initiative:** the willingness to try doing things, even if it is hard. When we try to accomplish something and succeed, it builds esteem, competence and feelings of having control in life. Even if we don't always reach our goals, we can feel better because we tried, and learned from the effort.
- **Creativity:** the ability to look at things in new ways. This includes the ability to use even painful experiences as building blocks for a better future. For example, an adult who experienced serious neglect in childhood may use the understanding s/he has gained from his/her own experience to develop community programs for youth. A child may write and illustrate a story about how to cope with alcohol problems in the family.

- *Humour*: the ability to laugh at ourselves and to find humour in situations even when there are problems.
- *Morality*: developing a sense of what is good and right, and a sense of being a good person, even when there may be ‘badness’ around us.

We are better able to build these resilience qualities into ourselves and our lives when families or other caring individuals, teachers, and community members enable the main protective factors that have a positive influence on the ability to cope:

- *Relationships* that provide ongoing and nonjudgmental support, listening, belief, kindness, and caring.
- *High expectations* that demonstrate belief in the person’s ability, and encourage effort and achievement.
- *Opportunities to learn* skills and knowledge that provide a sense of self-worth and personal competence, and make it possible to be a productive member of society.
- *Opportunities to participate* in positive activities and to do things that contribute to the well-being of others and the community.
- *Development of the thought patterns* that enable coping.

Modern research has found these factors to be essential. Inuit Elders knew these factors to be essential. Traditionally, Inuit have been a resilient people, overcoming great environmental, emotional and social challenges. Over their history, they learned the attitudes that were necessary for coping, and the strategies that encouraged and enabled resilience in the next generations. The changes of modern life have come to Inuit very recently. New ways of life and new ideas, and cultural losses, have created new problems. Adjustment and adaptation to sudden drastic change is not easy. The traditional attitudes and strategies that built resilience, however, apply to today’s life challenges as well. The basic human problems and goals are the same—coping with loss, rejection, trauma or failure, having good relationships, being able to take care of oneself and family, etc.—even though the details and context are different.

There are many people in every community who have undergone difficulties and tragedies, yet remain optimistic about the future and live positive lives. Elders have much to teach about how to overcome challenges and find ways to be positive and joyful. It is important that they have opportunities to share their knowledge of coping skills. In Kangiqsualujjuaq, for example, high-school students videotaped a suicide prevention meeting where Elders discussed their experiences of challenges and strategies for coping.

Traditional activities teach and strengthen skills that can enhance self-esteem and contribute to personal and community wellness. But more importantly, they also teach many of the emotional and thinking patterns that are important in resilience. Hunting, for example, requires patience, determination, confidence, and the ability to cope with difficult environmental challenges. If you are unsuccessful, you must also cope with that failure without losing confidence and hope.

Younger adults, youth and even children can also be important role models of resilience. There are many people who have experienced family dysfunction, abuse of various kinds, and other traumas, but have nevertheless been able to overcome these challenges. For example, an Inuk from Nunavut explains about a traditional practice that has affected some abandoned or orphaned children, *ilijait*, in communities:

*“These children are essentially slaves within a family or group. This is a traditional practice that is still present. These children end up either having to fend for themselves or eat leftovers and wear the same clothes until they are worn out... People will rarely— if ever—raise the subject for fear of causing trouble. How do these children ‘cope and become resilient’ ...?” (Personal communication)*

Yet at least some of these children have grown up to have productive positive lives. They have lessons to teach us about resilience.

Young people from Fort Good Hope in the NWT, who experienced a tragic loss of friends in an accident, speak of the things that helped them move on:

*“What has helped me is to receive the support of my parents, grandparents, big brother, older sister and friends; to know that I am not alone, even when I am feeling sad and lonely....*

*It is helpful to carry on with regular life. Doing homework helps me. It also helps to pat my dog, hang out with friends, watch TV, clean up around the house, eat, sleep, sit on the pot, listen to music, hug mom and play catch with dad....*



people and things will cause you to wonder. Other things you just have to accept. We have to protect our own person, our own self, all the time. We have to be aware of our own abilities and know when to participate in what is happening. We also need to know when to hold ourselves back from some activities.... There are days that are easier and some that are harder. Even when the day seems hard, you still have to get through it. If you have things that trouble you, you have to talk about them because that is the only way you will feel better.... It has to be someone that you are comfortable enough with to know that you can talk openly.... You have to search and find someone who can help you release your feelings without judging you." (Cornelius Nutaraq)<sup>33</sup>



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33. Oosten and Laugrand, 2001. pp.165-166.



*“We were taught how to think when we were growing up. We weren’t taught other people’s ideas; we learned how to make decisions of our own....”* (Tipuula Atagutsiak)



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