

Resiliency: Thriving in Adversity

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- students will be able to understand the concept of resiliency
- students will be able to recognize the interrelatedness of resiliency, protective factors and risk factors
- students will be able to assess personal protective factors
- students will be able to consider how strengthening protective factors and decreasing risk factors can make a difference for themselves and others
- students will be able to acknowledge characteristics of resiliency that they possess
- students will be able to initiate a shift in thinking—focusing on personal strengths as opposed to deficits

CONTENT AND TIME (80-MINUTE LESSON)

- 5.1 Introduction (15 minutes)
- 5.2 Activity: Building Protective Factors (35 minutes)
- 5.3 Activity: Putting Protective Factors to the Test (20 minutes)
- 5.4 Closure: Key Messages (10 minutes)

REQUIRED MATERIALS

HANDOUT 5.1: Protective Factor Rating Scale

HANDOUT 5.2: Characteristics that Foster Resiliency

Eggs, tape, construction paper, straws, balloons, string and newspaper

TEACHER-MADE SIGNS:

- You have good social skills
- Your parents know where you are, whom you are with and what you are doing

- You participate in community activities
- You feel connected to your school and you have good grades
- You have positive friends and supportive adults in the community

Journal books or loose-leaf paper

Resiliency has been defined as “the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances.” (Gordon, 1995). Some people are amazingly resilient: they survive torture, traumatic childhood, even time in a concentration camp, and actually grow through their experiences. But all of us have some resiliency. It has been found that one-half to two-thirds of children who grow up in families with mental illness, alcohol use disorder, abuse, or criminally involved parents or in poverty-stricken or war-torn communities overcome adversity and become successful adults. (Benard, 1995, p. 1).

For people to overcome trouble, somehow the protective factors in their lives have to outweigh the forces that drag them down. Some of these protective factors are present in resilient people themselves, characteristics like insight, independence, initiative, creativity, a strong ethical sense, and the ability to see the funny side of difficult situations. Other protective factors come from their environment.

Youth can decrease their chances of problems like dropping out of school, coming into conflict with the law, or being harmfully involved with substance use by increasing the protective factors in their lives. The aspects of life that increase their chances of these and other problems are called risk factors.

Protective and risk factors can be categorized into the five main areas: the individual, family, school, peers and neighbourhood (AADAC, 2003d, p. 3).

Protective factors include the following:

- developing good social skills (the individual)
- having parents who monitor where their children are, what they are doing and with whom (family)
- participating in positive social activities (neighbourhood)
- feeling connected to school (school)
- achieving good school grades (school)
- having friends who positively influence decision-making (peers)
- having supportive adults in the community (neighbourhood)

(AADAC, 2003e, p. 26)

Examples of risk factors are as follows:

- becoming involved with substance use at an early age (the individual)
- having friends who use or encourage use of ATODG (peers)
- belonging to a family with a history of substance use disorder (family)
- experiencing conflict within the family (family)
- having a poor connection to school (school)
- getting low school grades (school)
- having easy access to substances (neighbourhood) (AADAC, 2003e, p. 21)

5.1 Introduction

(15 minutes)

Define the term resiliency and discuss the interrelation of protective and risk factors. Invite students to take an introspective look at their own resiliency and how they can begin to build upon this. Throughout the lesson, encourage students to recognize the struggles they endure, to appreciate the skills and competencies they possess, and to think critically about drawing from their own abilities and the supports in their environment to experience growth and success.

Have students complete **HANDOUT 5.1: Protective Factor Rating Scale**. When they have finished, ask them to tally their scores and write the total in the space provided. Emphasize that the information on the rating scale is personal; therefore, students will not be asked to disclose their answers or their score.

Review the descriptor provided at the bottom of the handout. Explain that this rating scale can be used as a starting point for students to identify their own personal protective factors and to continue strengthening these. Scoring low does not imply that a student is going to develop problems with substance use. Similarly, a high score does not guarantee “smooth sailing” for another student. Regardless of the total score, this rating scale should be used to raise awareness about the strengths in their own personal development and social environment, and to build on these continually.

5.2 Activity: Building Protective Factors

(35 minutes)

This activity engages students in identifying risk factors for a young person, and creating protective factors to build resiliency and reduce the likelihood of involvement with harmful substance use. Divide the class into groups of five or six and distribute an egg to each group. Explain that this egg symbolizes a young person in the community. Write the following risk factors on the board:

- becoming involved with substance use at a young age
- having friends who use or encourage use of substances
- belonging to a family with a history of substance use disorder

- experiencing conflict within the family
- having a poor connection to school
- getting low school grades
- having easy access to substances.

Remind everyone that these factors put people at a greater risk of developing problems with substances. Ask the groups to identify the risk factors to which their young person will be exposed. Some groups may choose only one risk factor, while others may choose all seven. Once they have completed this, ask them to define the level of use for their young person. Is he or she at no use, beneficial use, casual/non-problematic use, problematic use or chronic dependence? The level of use should reflect the amount of risk factors in his or her life. For example, someone who has only one risk factor may use occasionally or not at all, while someone with all seven may be at the stage of problematic use or even chronic dependence.

Next, the groups’ task is to construct a protective environment that will prevent the egg from breaking once it is dropped. The groups will use several items to represent protective factors:

tape (1/2 arm’s length – finger to elbow):	developing good social skills
construction paper (8 1/2 X 11):	having parents who monitor where their children are, what they are doing and with whom
straws:	participating in positive social activities
balloons:	feeling connected to school and achieving good school grades
string (1/2 arm’s length – finger to elbow):	having friends who positively influence decision-making, and having supportive adults in the community

Assemble the materials with labels describing what each represents. The groups select a total of 20 items of their choice (for example, 5 pieces of tape, 3 pieces of construction paper, 1 straw, 7 balloons and 4 pieces of string). Some groups may choose only 2 materials that total 20 items, while others may select equal numbers of each item. This is entirely up to each group. After the groups have selected their items, they may begin assembling. They will have about 30 minutes left to complete this task.

5.3 Activity: Putting Protective Factors to the Test

(20 minutes)

Once the time is up, spread newspapers on the floor at each group. Explain that each group will have one or two minutes to present the reasoning behind the materials chosen and the construction built. A group member will then drop the egg in its protective environment onto the newspaper. The height from which each egg is dropped is dependent upon the number of risk factors and the level of use determined at the beginning of the activity. If a group decided that the young person had only one risk factor and was at the level of no use, then he or she is at a lower risk of developing problems. This group will drop its egg from a kneeling position. If another group decided that the young person had seven risk factors and was dependent, then he or she is at a much higher level of risk. This group will drop its egg from high up, while standing on a chair. Ask the members of each group to describe the amount of confidence they have in their egg's protective environment.

During the process of dropping the eggs, it is important to incorporate the following questions into the discussion:

- Why is it important for young people to have protective factors in different areas of their life (individual, family, peer, school and community)?
- How does the existence of protective factors in a young person's life influence the effect that risk factors have?
- Can young people choose the risk and protective factors to which they are exposed? (Name some they can choose; name some that they may have no choice about.)
- What are some other risk and protective factors that relate to substance use?

In answering the last question, you may want to group student answers into the five main areas: the individual, family, school, peers and neighbourhood (AADAC, 2003d, p. 3). Here are some examples

Risk factors

- physical trauma or abuse (the individual)
- poor self-concept (the individual)
- early aggressive behaviour (the individual)
- weak attachment to parents/guardians (family)
- parents/guardians with unclear rules and expectations (family)
- parents/guardians who have permissive attitudes about substance use (family)
- friends with favourable attitudes about substance use (peers)
- friends who perceive use as the norm (peers)
- lack of commitment to school (school)
- dropping out of school (school)
- community laws and norms that promote use of substances (neighbourhood)

Protective factors

- ability to cope with stress (the individual)
- strong self-esteem (the individual)
- independence and initiative (the individual)
- positive attachment to parents/guardians (family)
- parents/guardians with clear rules and expectations (family)
minimal family conflict (family)
- positive relationships with friends (peers)
- friends who are not involved with substance use (peers)
participation in extra-curricular activities at school (school)
- high expectations about school grades (school)
- positive activities in the community (neighbourhood)

(AADAC, 2003d, p. 12-23)

You may want to discuss briefly in which area students are most likely to be successful in effecting change and where they should focus their efforts. For example, it may be more difficult to change aspects of the neighbourhood than features of the school.

5.4 Closure: Key Messages

(10 minutes)

Have students read HANDBOUT 5.2: Characteristics That Foster Resiliency. Ask them to acknowledge individually which characteristics they possess. Again, emphasize the importance of building on individual strengths as opposed to deficits. All too often, we look at what we are lacking in our lives—what we do not have or what we have not accomplished. Remind students to turn that thinking around and focus on the attributes they possess and how they can use these to cope with difficulties, build upon their strengths and work towards attaining personal goals.

As a homework assignment, have students list and define three other personal characteristics that they believe foster resiliency as well. Clarify that these characteristics should be different from the ones already listed.

Journal writing assignment

In your journal, discuss the most meaningful characteristic of resiliency that you possess. Why is this characteristic important to you? How does it help shape your personality? How does it affect relationships with your peers? How does it relate to your self-confidence? Which of the characteristics is the least relevant to you? Why? Is this a characteristic that you could further develop?

Protective Factor Rating Scale

Read the following statements and rate them using the following rating scale:

Always 5 Frequently 4 Occasionally 3 Seldom 2 Never 1

1. I have good social skills.

5 4 3 2 1

2. My parents/guardians have clear rules and expectations.

5 4 3 2 1

3. I am tobacco-free (I do not use cigarettes, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco).

5 4 3 2 1

4. I receive positive encouragement from my friends.

5 4 3 2 1

5. I spend time each week in music, drama, art, reading, writing, sports or other positive activities that I enjoy.

5 4 3 2 1

6. I can feel confident without using substances.

5 4 3 2 1

7. My parents supervise my behaviour. They know where I am, who I am with and what I am doing.

5 4 3 2 1

8. I choose to hang out with friends who do not use illegal drugs.
- 5 4 3 2 1
9. I have a positive attitude about school and feel connected to my school.
- 5 4 3 2 1
10. I have good self-esteem: I like myself and I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be.
- 5 4 3 2 1
11. No one in my family uses substances in a problematic way.
- 5 4 3 2 1
12. I try to achieve good school grades.
- 5 4 3 2 1
13. My family gets along well and deals with conflict appropriately.
- 5 4 3 2 1
14. I think I cope well in stressful situations.
- 5 4 3 2 1
15. In my community, it is difficult to gamble and to get alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.
- 5 4 3 2 1
16. Because I make good choices, my family members or friends are proud of me and do not worry about my involvement with substance use.
- 5 4 3 2 1

17. I participate in extra-curricular activities at school.

5 4 3 2 1

18. I can be outgoing at parties without drinking.

5 4 3 2 1

19. I am generally happy.

5 4 3 2 1

20. I have a positive relationship with my parents/guardians.

5 4 3 2 1

Total score: _____

If you scored higher than 80 on this rating scale, you are very fortunate! You have protective factors that will have a positive influence on your decisions about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and gambling. Know the positive influences in your life and build on these. Surround yourself with supportive people and look for opportunities that encourage you to make healthy decisions.

Characteristics That Foster Resiliency

INSIGHTFULNESS – the ability to ask questions and think critically to uncover deeper meaning

INDEPENDENCE – the ability to self-direct and determine how life's experiences will influence us

SELF-CONFIDENCE – the ability to believe in ourselves and our potential for success

OPTIMISM – the ability to consider the possibility of future success, despite immediate difficulties

FLEXIBILITY – the ability to cope with a variety of circumstances

CREATIVITY – the ability to express ourselves in imaginative ways

HUMOUR – the ability to find amusement in our experiences

SPIRITUALITY – the ability to have faith in something greater than ourselves and appreciate the gifts we have been given

CONNECTEDNESS – the ability to maintain fulfilling relationships with other people

PERSEVERANCE – the ability to strive for achievement regardless of immediate difficulties

SELF-MOTIVATION – the ability to define personal goals and strive toward achievement
