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Recommended Citation

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FAMILY RESILIENCE: BEING REFINED BY THE FIRE

BY ALINA BALTAZAR

TEXTS

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” I Peter 1:6-7 NKJV

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13 NKJV

PURPOSE

The purpose of this seminar is to explore key processes in family resilience and how they can be applied to improve a family’s functioning.

POLE QUESTION

How many of you have heard of the term resilience? What do you believe it means?

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INTRODUCTION

These days we are more aware than ever how the result of sin impacts us on individual, family, community, and world levels. You can live an exemplary life, following everything the Bible teaches, but still struggle with the results of sin, such as illness, natural and manmade disasters, unemployment, death, divorce, crime, war, and violence within your family or community. Though following God's commandments does decrease some of the world's pain, the devil loves nothing more than to cause harm to God's children.

Though the devil intends to hurt God by hurting us and turn us away from God's protection, God has the power to make something beautiful that can arise out of the ashes. This is where we get the phrase refined by the fire. Multiple Bible texts refer to the trouble humans face in a sinful world. Though many ask, "How could a loving God allow bad things to happen," once you get to know God and the freedom He gives us, you better understand why even Christians will struggle. Like gold, our faith is refined by the struggles we experience if we allow it to make a positive change in our lives. In those struggles, we often must completely depend on the Lord to get us through by providing comfort, sending us support in various forms, or addressing the problem itself.

In the field of the social sciences, we call this post-traumatic growth. This is the psychological benefit that we can experience as a result of going through adversity that can help us rise to a higher level of functioning. There was a father who had recently lost his 6-year-old daughter in a terrible accident. As part of his grief, he realized he hadn't been a good husband or father. His daughter's death motivated him to be a better man and father to his remaining children. He admitted it probably wouldn't have happened if he hadn't lost his daughter. This is what God can do for us as a result of life's tragedies.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

You may have observed that some individuals and families seem to not only survive but even thrive when faced with adversity. Researchers have made efforts to understand this phenomenon better. Some themes, however, have helped individuals and families be resilient even when dealing with multiple life struggles. This phenomenon has been called resilience, defined as "the ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges." (Walsh, 2003, p. 399)

Research has also identified limits to resilience. The more tragedies individuals and families face, the seriousness of the trauma, and the younger age that it occurs, the harder it is to be resilient to where the impact of trauma is limited. (Masten, 2013) That doesn't mean that what you will learn in this seminar won't help those who have experienced multiple traumas but realize improvement may be limited.

RESILIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Those with good self-confidence are more likely to be resilient. Resilience begins in the context of relationships. It doesn't happen in a vacuum. Self-esteem isn't built on its own but within relationships with others. Though you may feel good about your performance, the only way you know it was done well is by feedback from others. You are more likely to care what others think when there is a connection with those individuals. After a traumatic experience, healing begins in the stability of a caring relationship. Our relationships with God, parents, siblings, friends, teachers, pastors, and mentors all contribute to who we become. Knowing there is someone in your life who is supportive and reliable is a big part of resilience.

Werner and colleagues' well-known study on resilience demonstrates the importance of relationships (1993). These researchers followed the lives of nearly 700 children of plantation workers on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. These children dealt with poverty and discrimination. One-third of this group had additional risk factors that included serious health problems, family alcoholism, violence, divorce, or mental illness. By the age of 18, 2/3 of those who were more at risk had not done well struggling with things such as early pregnancy, needing mental health services, or had gotten in trouble at school or with the law. This was expected.

The researchers wanted to better understand why 1/3 of these at-risk children had actually developed into being competent, caring, and confident young adults. When the researchers followed up with these individuals at the age of 40, all but two were still living successful lives. These individuals were even more successful than Kauai adults from less harsh backgrounds. This study found that some who had struggled as teens had actually turned their lives around. It was supportive relationships and religious involvement that was found to have the most significant impact on the resilience of these individuals. It is within the relationship where resilience begins.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

How many of you know someone who despite the odds against him/her still lived a healthy and successful life like the kids in Kauai? Raise your hand. What do you think made him/her resilient?

FAMILY STRESS, ADAPTATION, AND RESILIENCE

This seminar is building on what is known about individual resilience and extending it to family resilience. Stressful crises and chronic challenges do not just happen to an individual but also within the context of the family. What happens to one person impacts the whole family. By building on family strengths, families can emerge stronger and more

resourceful in meeting future challenges (Walsh, 2003). As mentioned earlier, a crisis can be a wake-up call to remind us of what is really important and to be more aware of changes that need to take place.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Have you or someone you know ever experienced a crisis where family relationships were strengthened? What do you think helped them do this? Discuss in smaller groups or with the larger group.

Now we will examine key processes in family resilience that have been identified by research. This section is adapted from Froma Walsh's chapter on Family Resilience in the 3rd edition of Normal Family Processes (2003).

FAMILY BELIEF SYSTEMS

Similar to the resilience that is connected to individual youth, religious involvement has many benefits to the family. A family's belief systems can have a powerful impact on how a family perceives a crisis. Adversity causes us to try and attach meaning to it. Shared beliefs can help family members make meaning of crisis situations, facilitate a more hopeful outlook, and offer spiritual connections throughout the process.

MAKING MEANING OF ADVERSITY

Though American society has a cultural tendency towards "rugged individualism" due to our pioneering past, most cultures around the world have a more communal approach. There are many benefits to this. Research has found that high-functioning families have a strong affiliation towards each other. They approach adversity as a shared challenge that can be faced as a family. When we work together to face problems, we are more likely to overcome them. The early Christian church functioned as a family unit giving strong support for one another.

Resilient families are more likely to see adversity as a normal part of life. As Christians, we know there is sin in this world, which helps us to understand why strife will inevitably happen even when you live an exemplary life. We all have different responses to life's challenges. When we can understand sin's role in the problems we face and react differently to these problems, it can help decrease blame.

Grief reactions are common. It is important to acknowledge the loss that may have occurred. It is not unusual to ask questions like: How could this happen? What can be done? As part of the grieving process, we may want to know more details about the tragedy. It can help fill in gaps to

allow for healing. Also, we want to know how to prevent something like that from happening again. Sometimes that is easier said than done. This is all part of the normal human response to adversity and can help us make sense of what happened.

POSITIVE OUTLOOK

One can't underestimate the importance of hope. The Christian faith is filled with messages of hope. Hope is as essential to our spirit as oxygen is to our lungs. No matter how bleak our current situation, there is hope for a better future. It is the lack of hope that often leads to people committing suicide.

Optimism is a close cousin to hope. It can be learned by focusing on little successes that happen along the way. Optimism doesn't fix our problems, but it can help us fight the tendency to give up. This helps us have a can-do spirit and see the potential within each family member and the family as a whole. Though a positive attitude doesn't change reality, it can help you accept what can't be changed. Which then will help you focus on what is still possible even within the current limitations.

SPIRITUALITY

Having transcendent beliefs helps us to see beyond ourselves and our current struggles. Most families find strength, comfort, and guidance in the midst of adversity through connections with religious traditions. Prayer is a way for us to connect immediately with our loving Father. Spending time in nature is another powerful way to commune with our creator God. Reading the Bible can help us develop understanding. Our communities of faith can also be an excellent resource for comfort and practical assistance.

A word of caution, adversity can cause a crisis of faith. It is important to keep in mind that failure to overcome adversity is not a sign of a lack of faith. We don't want to be like the people in Jesus' time who thought the blind man's parents must have committed some great sin that caused the blindness (see John 9:1-2) or like Job's friends who pushed him to repent when he knew he didn't do anything wrong to deserve his losses.

Many individuals wonder, "How could a loving God allow this terrible thing to happen. Why isn't he answering my prayers!" God is often silent in times of distress, choosing instead to answer our prayers differently than we desire. This can be difficult to accept. When we are depressed, we often feel disconnected from God, right when we need him the most. This is when Godly friends and family are so important. They can offer support and encouragement to represent God's loving care in ways we can't feel in our distressed state.

FAMILY ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS

Families come in all shapes and sizes, especially these days. One out of four children in the U.S. are growing up without a father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This isn't just

happening in the U.S. but around the world. Research has found that family flexibility and stability, connectedness, and various resources are beneficial to resiliency, improving outcomes for all family forms.

FLEXIBILITY AND STABILITY

Some families are naturally more flexible than others. There are benefits to clear roles and boundaries, but families often can't return to the normal life they knew in the aftermath of a major change. They will need to adapt. When there is parental disability or divorce, families must construct a new normal. At the same time, families still need to maintain or restore a sense of stability as soon as possible.

Firm yet flexible is the way to go in parenting children during these life transitions. During stressful times, children need to know that their parents and other caregivers will be able to provide nurturance, protection, and guidance. It is during periods of struggle that children most need security and predictability.

CONNECTEDNESS

A crisis has the potential to shatter family cohesion, but this is the time when families need to turn to one another for mutual support. One way to do this is to respect the different ways each will respond to the struggle. Some may need to be alone, spend time with friends outside of the family, and/or take a longer or shorter time to heal than others would expect. We all grieve differently.

Complete family cohesion may not always be possible. It helps to have workable coalitions – especially among the parents. These connections can then bring about more family connectedness. With the loss of a parent through divorce, abandonment, or death, the child needs to find a way to connect through pictures and stories. In addition, children need reassurance that he/she will not lose other family members.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Though we have spent a lot of time focusing on the resiliency of immediate families, they should not expect to do it all on their own. Extended family and other social networks can be an invaluable resource during a crisis. Blood is thicker than water is where we get the phrase that explains the close bonds families can have with each other through thick and thin.

Unfortunately, extended family isn't always available. Thus, social networks of churches and community organizations can help to fill the gap. Financial resources can be difficult to come by and a challenge to access. Support systems can help families access these resources. All these resources provide practical assistance, but also be a source of emotional support and role models for children whose parents are more preoccupied.

COMMUNICATION

Think about a time you were in a crisis and how important communication was. In some situations, what we say can make a difference between life and death. This is when clear communication is absolutely essential not only to share vital information that is necessary to survive, and problem solve but also to maintain relationships.

CLARITY

When under stress, it can become more challenging to communicate clearly. We can misunderstand and make assumptions since there is often less time for clarification. Sometimes communication is intentionally limited due to concerns of how it may harm children or frail older relatives. This can lead loved ones to fill in the blank with incorrect information that can cause more distress or conflict. If you struggle with communicating on certain difficult topics, there are age-appropriate books available to rent or purchase. Doctors and counselors are also a good resource for suggestions.

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Instead of attacking one another, resilient families work together to resolve problems. The more people involved in brainstorming solutions, the better, but it isn't easy finding a solution everyone will agree upon. You may have to compromise, but you should also know what you aren't willing to compromise. Problem-solving is a learning process. Once a solution doesn't seem to work, try to see it as a chance to learn so you can come up with an even better solution.

Focus on what matters for your family. Decide on clear goals, take concrete steps, and build on your successes. Ideally, your family will take a more proactive stance and figure out ways to prevent problems, thus preparing for the future.

OPEN EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Open communication supported by a climate of mutual trust, empathy, and tolerance for differences, enables family members to share the range of feelings that may come as a response to a crisis or chronic stress. When a family feels comfortable sharing, they can avoid the repression of emotion, controlling behaviors, and behavioral issues in children.

There can be gender differences in how men and women communicate. Men are more likely to withdraw or get angry. Women are more likely to reach out to others for support and become more emotional or sad. Men may feel they have to stay strong and can't show emotion. This can lead to health problems or turning to unhealthy ways of coping. Women may resent a husband's withdrawal then pursue him even harder, leading to an angry response. When emotions can't be shared between couples, it can lead to divorce. It is important to share emotions and find comfort in one another.

The best way to express your concerns or desires is through assertive communication. It is a way to state your need and also decreases the possibility of a defensive response by the other party. A great way to do this is by following this script: "I feel _____ (state an actual emotion, not an opinion) when/about _____ (describe the situation in an external way, avoid using the word 'you'). The reason

this upsets me is _____. What I need from you is _____.” Here is an example, “I feel unloved when I share my concerns about my job and am told I have to keep working. This upsets me because I believe my job is possibly harming my health. I worried I won’t be able to continue to provide and care for my family if my health is compromised. What I need from you is to support my search for another job and be willing to make some sacrifices if the new job pays less.”

There are a few reasons why this communication approach works so well. When we use “I messages” we are making the issue about us, not the other person. Sharing our emotions can help draw out empathy from the other person. Explaining why the situation is upsetting can increase understanding. Then the conversation moves to problem-solving. Ideally, the listener will ask clarification questions in a non-defensive manner then summarize what has been heard. The original speaker needs to be willing to compromise with the other person in order to fill the perceived need. At first, this type of communication may not feel natural, but you will find a style that will work best for you with practice. For more communication tips between couples, see The Gottman Institute website, www.gottman.com

APPLICATION QUESTION

Now it is time to practice assertive communication. Find a partner you know well, if possible. Think of something you would like to say in an assertive way. It could be a real or a made-up scenario. Follow the script in this seminar. If there isn’t anyone you would feel comfortable partnering with, write down what you could say following the same script. Remember to avoid saying, “I feel that...” It can lead to the other person feeling attacked, and you may get a defensive response. Name an actual emotion. See the Emotions Wheel to help you out. When done, discuss if you thought this style of communication was helpful.

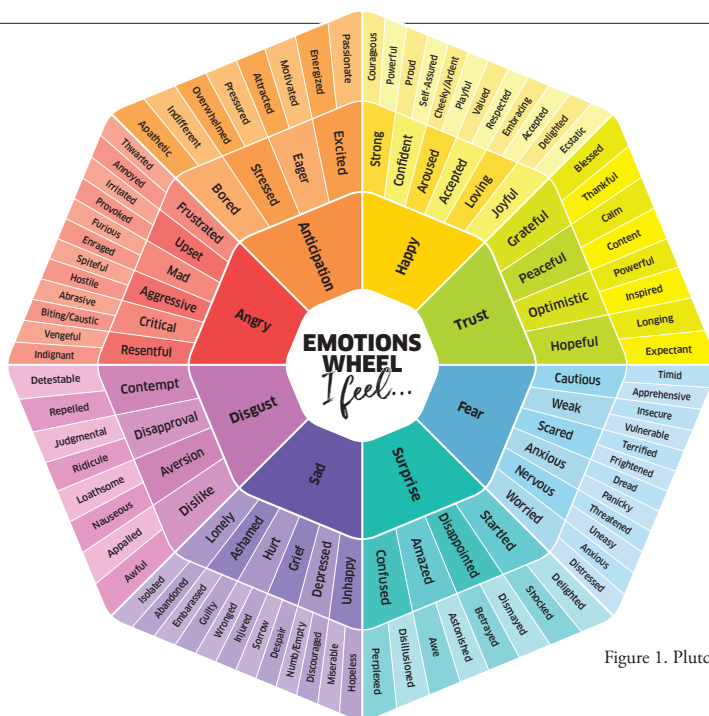


Figure 1. Plutchik's wheel of emotions, 1980.

IS YOUR FAMILY RESILIENT?

Take the Walsh Family Resilience Questionnaire to see where your family is at being resilient. Ask yourself, how does my family deal with crises and ongoing challenges.

| I. Belief Systems | Rarely/never | | | Almost Always | |
|--|---------------------|---|---|----------------------|---|
| 1. Family faces distress as a team | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Distress is common and understandable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Shared effort in managing challenge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Try and make sense of stress | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Maintain hopefulness | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Encouraging toward each other | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Maintain persistence | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Have an accepting attitude | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Share important values | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Use spirituality | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Challenge inspires creativity | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Display compassion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Learn from challenges | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Section Total: /65 | | | | | |

| II. Organization Patterns | Rarely/never | | | Almost Always | |
|--|---------------------|---|---|----------------------|---|
| 14. Flexible when adapting to stress | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Stable and reliable home environment | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Parental leadership present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. Reliance on family members | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. Respect for individual needs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. Role models are present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. Reliance on peers and the community | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. Financial stability is present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. Community resources are present | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Section Total: /45 | | | | | |

| III: Communication/Problem-solving | Rarely/never | | | Almost Always | |
|---|---------------------|---|---|----------------------|---|
| 23. Family members clarify information | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. Family is clear and consistent in actions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 25. Family members can express opinions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 26. Family can share difficult feelings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 27. Share positive feelings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 28. Family members display understanding | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 29. Family collaborates in decision making | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 30. Goal setting is used | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 31. Family learns from mistakes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 32. Family plans for the future | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Section Total: /50 | | | | | |

Total: /160

CONCLUSION

With widespread concern for the breakdown of the family, it is helpful to think of resilience to help strengthen families in all their forms and address their unique struggles. Instead of focusing on problems, we want to focus on how families can succeed despite the barriers they face. This seminar introduced the topic of resilience, limits to resilience, ways families can be resilient with spiritual implications throughout, and the resiliency levels within your family. You can apply what was learned in this seminar to your own family or make a difference in the families struggling around you. Remember, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13 NKJV

APPLICATION QUESTION

Now that you know your family’s resilience levels, what do you think you can do to help your family or the families you know struggling to be more resilient? Name one thing you can do this week and in the near future that you can commit to.

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