

Identifying Resilience Attributes in Adolescents Using the Youth Resilience Assessment

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Abstract

The Youth Resilience Assessment is a strengths-based assessment that helps to identify the adolescent or college student client's attributes that contribute to resilience. This article discusses the research on resilience, describe the 12 attributes that we found to comprise resilience in our sample population and shows how this knowledge can help our young clients become more self-aware and be able to find ways to use their strengths to work toward their goals.

What is Resilience and Why is it Important?

The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate® Dictionary, Eleventh Edition, defines resilience as, "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change." Reivich and Shatte identify four uses for resilience. Many individuals must call on their reserves of resilience to overcome the negative experiences of their childhood. Abuse, divorce, poverty, and neglect can weigh heavy on those who have experienced any of them during childhood. Resilience helps to contain the damage of these experiences and help the individual live the life they want. Resilience also helps us steer through the everyday stresses and hassles that fill modern life. A third use of resilience is to help us bounce back from adverse events such as job loss, divorce, a death in the family. We can become either helpless or resigned to our fate or can use our internal resources to bounce back. Finally, resilience helps us reach out into the world and find renewed purpose and meaning in life. This allows us to achieve what we are capable of.

There has been much research in the past fifty years about resilience, mostly about children growing up in difficult circumstances. How did at least a third of these children become successful, resilient adults? Researchers, such as Werner (1982) and Garmezy (1974), identify a number of positive protective factors that are common to these children. Primarily, there was a caretaker in their environment who believed in them, such as a parent, relative or teacher. These kids also had a positive social support network, such as involvement in a church or community group. What traits do these kids display? They feel confident in their ability to problem solve, make decisions and communicate. They are empathic, work well with others and are willing to ask for help and give help. Additionally, they view mistakes as obstacles to overcome; they set realistic goals and they are internally driven.

So, if an individual did not have someone who believed in them or had little social support and has few resilient traits, is that individual doomed to a life of adversity and misery? More and

more evidence indicates that this is not the case. Martin Seligman, in *Learned Optimism* (1990) determined that resilience skills can be learned. While we cannot change the events of our past or the world around us, we can change the way we think about those events. One of the ways we can start changing our resilience mindset is to be more realistic in our thinking. By accurately assessing one's own strengths, identifying the true causes of problems and evaluating oneself and others, we get a truer picture of the events unfolding around us and our level of control over those events.

Many people tend to view events in an overly positive way while many others are overly pessimistic. Reivich and Shatte believe that developing "realistic optimism," the ability to maintain a positive outlook without denying reality, actively appreciating the positive aspects of a situation without ignoring the negative aspects, helps to build resilience. In "The Resilience Factor" (2002), they offer seven skills an individual can learn that can build resilience:

1. Learning your ABCs – a technique whereby you learn to identify your thoughts and how they affect your feelings and behavior
2. Avoiding thinking traps – a technique to identify the thinking mistakes that people regularly make when faced with adversity
3. Detecting icebergs – a technique for identifying deep beliefs and determining when they are or are not working
4. Challenging beliefs – a technique to test the accuracy of your beliefs
5. Putting it in perspective – a technique to deal with the "what-ifs" so you are better prepared to deal with the real problems that come along.
6. Calming and focusing – a technique designed to help you stay calm and focused during stressful times.
7. Real-time resilience – a technique whereby you can quickly change your counter-productive thoughts into more resilient ones.

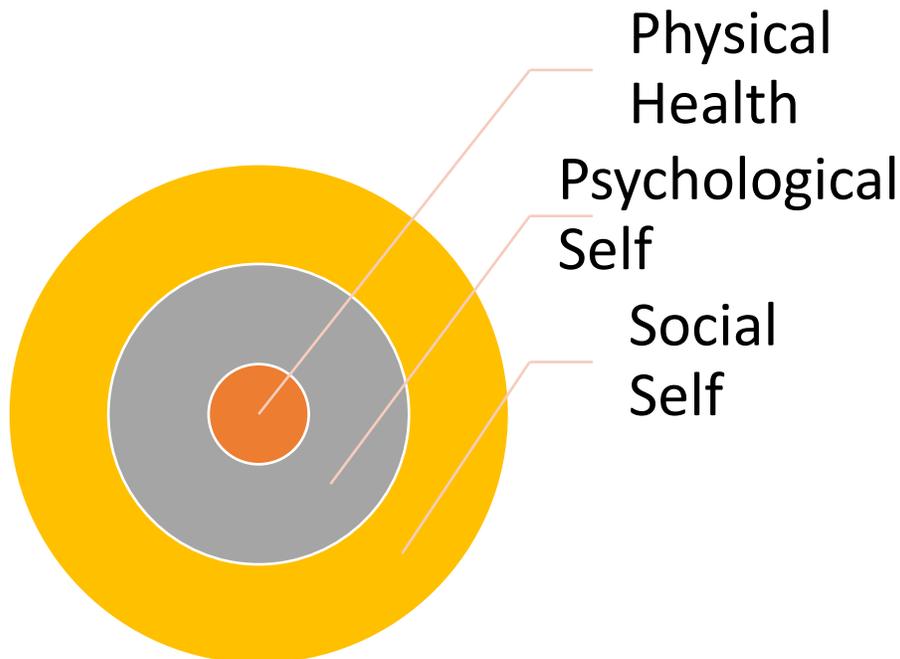
Positive psychology research has identified more techniques that can build positive emotion and optimism. Seligman and Peterson have examined the "Three Good Things" procedure as a means for boosting optimism. In this exercise, an individual writes down, on a daily basis, three good things that happened that day. Next to each entry, the person writes down why the good thing went well. In this way, the writer comes to see that they had an impact on the event. This method has been shown to build positive emotion and optimism over time as long as the individual continues to practice this exercise. Just like with physical exercise, we need to exercise our optimism "muscles."

By continuing to “work out,” we build our resilience and are better able to overcome our negative past experiences, steer through the everyday stress of life, bounce back from adverse events, and reach out into the world and achieve our purpose.

Assessing Resilience

Graham, Cuthbert and Sloan elaborated on the ways that we can improve our resilience in Lemonade: The Leader’s Guide to Resilience at Work (2012) and created an assessment for leaders in organizations called the Resilience at Work Assessment (RAW-A). These resources can be found at www.theresilienceproject.net.

Theoretical Underpinnings



The theoretical underpinnings of the Youth Resilience Assessment mirror the theory behind the RAWA. This resilience model is based on the biopsychosocial model described by psychiatrist George Engel (1977). He suggested that to understand medical issues, one needs to consider the physical, psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the illness. The above graphic of concentric circles shows that at our core is our physical health, how well our body is managing life. The second concentric circle is our psychological self. These are our personal attributes. The outer circle is our social self, how we relate to others in our world and what attributes we use when we do so. Finally, every individual lives in the larger environment, what

we call the context. Our research has suggested that we can think about resilience in the same way. How we care for our bodies, think about ourselves and those around us all contribute to our ability to be resilient. Additionally, more recent research (Ungar and Theron, 2019) emphasizes the amount of resources an individual has access to in the environment also impacts how well they can endure adversity.

After reviewing the research on resilience, the authors created a list of attributes for the RAW-A that were believed to be found within resilient people. These attributes were divided into three domains: attributes associated with how we relate to ourselves (the psychological self); how we relate to others (the social self) and how we relate to events in the environment (the context).

The five attributes that comprise the psychological self include: confidence, optimism, positivity, self-awareness and self-management. The five attributes that comprise the social self include: appreciation, helping, accepting, empathy and collaboration. The five attributes that comprise the context include: reframing, goal-oriented, future minded, purposeful and proactive.

After a pilot study was completed using 101 adult subjects, the model was supported with the exception of the proactive attribute which was renamed perseverant.

To date, the RAW-A has been taken by over 2500 leaders around the world. An analysis of the subsequent data revealed that the three attributes that contributed most to the concept of resilience were collaboration, purposeful and future minded. Upon reflection, this makes sense. Future-minded appears related to hope. Purposeful appears related to having meaning in one's life. Collaboration reinforces what Christopher Peterson, one of the authors of *Character Strengths and Virtues*, always said, "Other people matter."

Youth Resilience Assessment

As a follow-up to RAW-A, the authors began an investigation of the level of resilience among adolescents and college students. This population is still in the process of developing as human beings and by assessing their level of resilience at this earlier age, strategies could be designed to build their resilience. Thus, they created the Youth Resilience Assessment.

Development of the Youth Resilience Assessment

Again, one of the primary findings in Werner's research into resilience as it applies to children and adolescents suggested that individuals who had someone who believed in them were more likely to flourish through adversity. The importance of this finding--that an individual feels a strong connection to others in the environment--cannot be overstated. Therefore, the resilience attributes of the RAW-A needed to be adapted. The development of the assessment started with

19 attributes and 79 items (4 or 5 items for each attribute) to accommodate these findings. The challenge was to determine which attributes and items in the assessment most closely reflected the concept of resilience.

Reliability

The assessment was administered to 79 eighth grade students at a private school in the northern Chicago suburbs. Thus, the assessment items that had the greatest internal consistency were identified. This would assure valid and reliable responses to the assessment. The analysis revealed 40 items and 12 attributes with reliability coefficients and variance levels listed below.

Domain reliability was examined using Cronbach’s alpha (a reliability coefficient statistic). All domains exceeded the traditional threshold of .70. The coefficient reliabilities were as follows: Self domain alpha = 0.78; Others domain alpha = 0.86; Environment domain alpha = 0.81. All alphas indicated high reliability.

Reliability scores for the attributes were strong (greater than .70) with the majority of attributes having scores of .78 or higher. This validation study and the analyses performed identified 12 constructs (attributes) with strong factor loadings and internal consistency. These were then aggregated into the three domains, as described below.

The table below shows the attribute alphas separated by domain:

Factor	Domain	Attribute	Cronbach’s Alpha
4	Self	Achievement Oriented	0.73
7	Self	Goal Oriented	0.78
11	Self	Optimism	0.71
12	Self	Self-Awareness	0.82
1	Others	Helping	0.88
2	Others	Collaborative	0.87
3	Others	Social Connection	0.86
10	Others	Accepting	0.75
5	Environment	Purposeful	0.82
6	Environment	Perseverant	0.78
8	Environment	Future Minded	0.78
9	Environment	Reframing	0.72

Finally, a principal component factor analysis was applied to these 12 remaining attributes/variables, with the goal of determining whether underlying factors were evident in the survey instrument. The proportion of item variance accounted for can be seen in the “Proportion Var” row in the table below. The 12 factors accounted for 69% of the cumulative variance,

which suggested that the 12 attributes actually were a valid and useful measure of the level of resilience in each individual assessed with the Youth Resilience Assessment.

Factors	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12
Proportion Var	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Cumulative Var	0.08	0.16	0.23	0.30	0.36	0.42	0.48	0.52	0.57	0.61	0.65	0.69

The twelve attributes of the Youth Resilience Assessment are defined as follows:

	DOMAIN: Relationship to Self (Psychological Self)
Achievement Oriented	Being confident in the ability to cope with the world. Believing in one’s abilities, skills, or attributes and capacity to succeed in whatever is undertaken.
Goal-Oriented	Setting goals provides a compass to guide an individual through life’s journey. Setting realistic goals creates a better chance of reaching those goals.
Optimism	The ability to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect more favorable outcomes.
Self-awareness	Having the ability to reflect on one’s thinking and feeling. This includes having an understanding of how we are perceived by others.
	DOMAIN: Relationship to Others (Social Self)
Social Connection	The feeling that an individual belongs to a group and generally feels close to other people.
Helping	Providing support to those who need it. Caring for or assisting a friend or colleague builds confidence, community and trust.
Accepting	The ability to ask for and receive help from others.
Collaboration	Being a team player means sharing information and resources to achieve better results and make collaborators more engaged.
	DOMAIN: Relationship to the Environment (Context)

Reframing	The ability to shift perspective, and see “reality” in a new light. Seeing challenges as learning opportunities encourages reasonable risk-taking, and fostering personal and professional growth.
Future-mindedness	The ability to envision new possibilities that get individuals beyond the “here and now” and be better able to put what is occurring in the present into better perspective.
Purposeful	The ability to test decisions to see if they are consistent with one’s values and beliefs.
Perseverant	The ability to be persistent in doing something despite difficulty; unwavering.

What is most notable about the top three attributes that contribute to resilience are within the domain of Relationship to Others. As Ungar and Theron (2019) point out, having access to resources is a primary factor in being able to manage through adversity. By adopting a collaborative, helping attitude, adolescents and college students are more likely to thrive.

Implications for Coaching

In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Lindgren (2011) describes what she calls the core methods of youth coaching. These core methods include: a) strengthening self, b) increasing skills, c) supporting education, d) including parents, e) accessing resources, and f) providing both individual and group coaching. She states that while all of these methods are not necessary in all youth coaching, most of these methods are used in each coaching engagement.

By utilizing the Youth Resilience Assessment, the client has an opportunity to increase self-awareness, thus strengthening the self. With increased self-awareness, the client can create more realistic and attainable goals. Knowing which attributes are their client’s strengths, the coach can craft powerful questions to help the client build toward their goals and their future.

The Youth Resilience Assessment can help to identify the skills the client wants to work on. For example, since social connection is a key attribute in overall resilience, goals may be targeted toward strengthening this attribute. The following ways to focus on building social connection were enumerated by Avenson (2020):

- Maintain contact with existing friends and reconnect with your old friends. Make an effort to carve out time to be with the people you care about.

- Remember that it's not the quantity of social relationships but the quality that really matters.
- If you use social media, use it as a *way station*; use Facebook so that you can meet up somewhere. If it's used as a *destination*, as a place to withdraw socially and interact as a non-authentic self, it can deepen your sense of loneliness and isolation.
- Create a setting where people can let their guards down and safely confide in each other. Practice speaking about your feelings with authenticity and listening to others non-judgmentally and with empathy and compassion.
- One of the best ways to forge and maintain friendships is through built-in regularity

The youth coach partners with the client to incorporate these social connection skills into the coaching by asking questions and providing accountability.

This is just one example as to how the results of the Youth Resilience Assessment can facilitate growth in the adolescent coaching client. In *Lemonade* (Graham, Cuthbert, Sloan 2012), there are strategies that can be adapted for use with the adolescent coaching client for most of the attributes measured by the Youth Resilience Assessment.

Limitations and Further Research

The results of the pilot study of the Youth Resilience Assessment are preliminary. The respondents were eighth graders in a suburban private school. The normative behavior of these young teens may not accurately reflect the norms of older teens or teens from diverse backgrounds. Use of this assessment with these other populations will yield more robust results that can be applicable to more adolescents.

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