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1-2015

Resilience: A Pathway to Healthier and Happier Living

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Recommended Citation

Stuntzner, S. (2015). Resilience: A Pathway to Healthier and Happier Living. Coeur d'Alene Press.
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Resilience: A Pathway to Healthier and Happier Living

Resilience....What does it mean? How does a person acquire it? What is its relationship to disability, employment, and quality of life? These are some questions people may ponder when they hear it used in conjunction with disability, employment, and healthier living. While the expectation of being resilient following a traumatic or life changing event is an embedded value within our culture, resilience is not a topic often discussed or readily understood. It is either assumed it will just materialize or it is simply expected. Such beliefs are not necessarily helpful because there are times in all peoples' lives when situations and events do not go well or as planned and take us by surprise; thus knocking us off our feet! When this happens, we find ourselves in a position where we might want to consider resilience.

Resilience, as a concept and as an option for healthier living, has gained attention and momentum in the past 10 to 12 years. It is often defined as the "ability to bounce back and move forward in a positive fashion following a traumatic or difficult life event." While people are born with varying abilities to "rebound" and "bounce back", there is good news! First is the fact that people may be resilient and coping well in some parts of their lives but not in others. Thus, if we are challenged in some parts of our lives (i.e., advent of disability), it does not mean all is lost; there is hope! Additionally, regardless of a person's present situation and ability to function, research is demonstrating that people can learn and enhance their resilience. Related is the known reality that the more skills a person has the more he or she will be resilient.

Disability, employment, and quality of life are three topics which have a definite relationship to resilience. Following the presence of disability, people experience numerous changes in their life, many of which are sudden and unexpected (i.e., alterations of personal mobility and functioning, unemployment or underemployment, lack of access to public places, loss or change in social and familial support, reduced financial or insurance options); yet, they are "expected" by society to move on in a positive fashion, often with little support or guidance. Tied to this are the potential changes in earning capacity, employment, financial well-being, and in having to ability to access the quality of life one either used to have or would like to have presently.

Similarly, disability is a situation which sometimes causes employers, business owners, and others to think and behave in ways that continue to promote negative and inaccurate societal beliefs about persons with disabilities and their ability to be employed. For example, many employers believe persons with disabilities will cost too much to accommodate in the work place, when the reality is that roughly 80% of job accommodations cost less than \$500.00. Related is the notion that some employers think their Worker's Compensation rates will automatically increase (due to the unfounded belief that persons with disabilities will somehow cause more on-the-job accidents). Some may believe they will lose business customers if they employ someone with a disability. Still others contend that their employees will not be comfortable around persons with disabilities. The list goes on...As a result, such attitudes present additional obstacles and hurdles for persons with disabilities and represent one more situation they must contend with and bounce back from.

Situations such as that described are not uncommon for persons with disabilities; many micro-aggressions exist within our society along with the continued presence of misconceptions and inaccurate beliefs about persons with disabilities, their employability, and even their desire to be working. For instance, the 2013 Bureau of Labor and Statistics indicates that 17.6% of persons with disabilities are employed compared to 68.9% of persons with disabilities.

Compounding these figures is the fact that a much larger percentage of persons with disabilities want to be employed but are not. Reasons for this are numerous and may include an inability to locate a job with much needed health insurance benefits, make enough money so they can support themselves without additional outside assistance (i.e., SSI, SSDI), or cannot find a way to navigate employer bias and discrimination as a part of the hiring process, just to name a few. Hearing about this may not be easy, but it is a common experience of many persons with disabilities and such situations only represent the tip of the iceberg regarding the many issues they sometimes face and are asked by society to successfully overcome.

Living well with a disability is about much more than dealing with the disability and its disability-related changes; it is about learning to be resilient and to develop ways to care for oneself in a healthier and more confident manner. In an effort to assist persons with disabilities in acquiring and strengthening their ability to bounce back and to successfully deal with difficult life events, Dr. Susan Stuntzner, Assistant Professor of the Rehabilitation Counseling and Human Services program for the University of Idaho - Coeur d'Alene, has developed a 10-module resilience intervention which she uses in her current "resilience and coping" study for women with disabilities. The study is taking place at the University of Idaho Harbor Center in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.