

The Relationship Between Mental Health And Resilience in Marriage and Family

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I am going to share briefly on the topic of resilience and mental health, perhaps from another perspective. Since COVID19 began about three years ago, the topic of resilience has become more popular, although it has been a part of mental health for decades.

I do note, that although millions were impacted negatively by COVID19, yet research tells us that millions more, under the same circumstance, responded more positively. Why is this? It is so because they were resilient.

Having Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as my theoretical orientation and being a Marriage and Family Therapist, I cannot resist looking at the topic of resilience through the eyes of marriage, parenting, and family. These experiences encompass all of our lives in some way.

Resilience: The American Psychological Association states: “Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them:

- the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world.
- the availability and quality of social resources
- specific coping strategies.

Psychological research demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced.”

Here is what psychologist Catherine More states in her article “Resilience Theory: A Summary of the Research: “When we face adversity, misfortune, or frustration, resilience helps us bounce back. It helps us survive, recover, and even thrive in the face and wake of misfortune, but that’s not all there is to it.”

“Resilience can help protect you from various mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety. Resilience can also help offset factors that increase the risk of mental health conditions, such as being bullied or previous trauma.”

Follow me closely as I walk through this topic through the eyes of marriage, parenting, and family.

In one of my seminars titled, “Keeping it hot during the tough times,” I present this concept: “If tragedy strikes before compassion is activated, your marriage is in trouble. . . If

there is very little or no compassion, understanding, openness, sharing, holding each other, loving, or cuddling, then there is a greater chance that the unexpected will strike you out.”

To put it in simpler terms, when a major car accident leaves a spouse crippled, or a partner is fired from the job, or a wife discovers she has breast cancer, or a husband has a heart attack, and there is very little or no compassion, empathy, or unconditional loving in the relationship, then resilience is very difficult to attain. This is no bouncing back. Note again that “resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences.”

I am suggesting that at the core, resilience, bouncing back, or adapting is not possible in families and marriages if the following are not in place before tragedy strikes:

- Unconditional acceptance
- Unconditional loving
- A spirit of forgiveness
- Warmth
- Creative ways of loving and caring for each other
- Equalitarian perspective on roles
- Flexibility

I can't help but refer to one of my quotes about a myth of marriage and why many are not prepared when tragedy strikes.

“Many behave as though marriage is a bed of roses. Marriage is not just a bed of roses. There are more things in the bed than roses. What makes a rose plant special are the thorns on the stem. You cannot hold the rose without holding the stem.”

In other words, healthy couples are those who have the tools previously mentioned and are able to deal with the thorns, thus turning tragedy into opportunity to grow. This is what resilience means in marriage and family.

Here's another way of looking at it. The rose petals will fade and dry up (tragedy or pain in our lives). Here's how I put it to demonstrate resilience.

“The dry petals (the tragedies or pain in a relationship) can be used to make a beautifully scented potpourri that can fill a home with sweet-smelling aroma.”

When there is resilience, the pain become growing opportunities. Relationships that have a better change of bouncing back after a tragedy, are those built with the tools aforementioned: unconditional acceptance, unconditional loving, a spirit of forgiveness, warmth, creative ways of loving and caring for each other, equalitarian perspective on roles, flexibility. They know how to use the “dry petals.” That's resilience.

Here is another perspective from an outstanding marriage fitness coach, Mort Fertel. He writes about the meaning of true love in relationships and what that true love does. Resilience is reflected in these sentences:

“True love is not about compatibility; it's about making a core connection . . . The challenge is to see past the externalities to the soul of the matter. This is where love

happens, and this is where a marriage is protected from change. . . Connect at your cores, and you can change careers, hairstyles, hobbies, interests, friends, favorite restaurants, and fashion preferences. Through all your changes, your love will last.”

For me, this connection he talks about is established by incorporating those tools I mentioned twice already that facilitate resilience.

I will now look at resilience through the perspective of parenting and one practice that can set children up to become weak adults. This is about **second-guessing**. Now you are wondering what second-guessing has to do with resilience.

First, what is second-guessing? One answer is this:

“To question or criticize actions or decisions of (someone) often after the results of those actions or decisions are known.”

Here’s another:

“Second-guessing oneself is a form of insecurity, anxiety and lack of self-confidence about whether you have made the right decision or not.”

Let me demonstrate how parents sow doubt through second-guessing that leads to anxiety, fretting, worry, low self-esteem, and self-doubt, which can make resilience difficult. A mother asks her five-year-old daughter to go and close the back door. The child goes and closes the back door. A few minutes later the mother asks, “Sally, did you close the back door?” The daughter says, “Yes Mom.” Then the mother responds, “Are you sure you did.” Go and check and make sure you did close the door.” This form of questioning becomes a norm between mother and daughter.

As she grows, she begins to seriously doubt her ability to make life-long decisions. She always questions herself? Second-guessing herself becomes a part of her life. Thus resilience (bouncing back) from tough times or tragedy becomes challenging. During COVID19 there was a lot of second-guessing.

I had a male client who cancelled getting married twice, each time two weeks before the wedding day. When I explored deeper, he shared that he grew up with his grandmother and from a little boy, she constantly questioned his personal decisions or when he did something she asked him to do. Each time she would ask: “Did you really do what I said?” and other such statement.

Let me share with you a letter I received from a 15-year-old client who gave permission to share it. She came to counseling because she had years of anxiety and needed to deal with it. She is brilliant and doing well in school. When examined closely, it became clear that from a young age, her mother also taught her to doubt her actions or decisions. She was being crippled by second-guessing. Today, at age fifteen, each time she has to do something, especially in front of the school class, she doubts her ability to do it. She has restrained herself from showing anxiety. After doing the task, she runs to the bathroom to quiet her anxiety.

Here are few paragraphs from the letter she gave me:

Today was the day I found out how abnormal it is for people to feel so numb. The evening breeze blowing through my hair, raindrops falling so silently during the night. Sleepless nights after a rough day. Reckless decisions being made after people shut me out. It all comes down to one conclusion. I've been through enough stress to the point where it's hard to find my normal self again. What's my normal self-doing being hidden? See the thing is it's hard to let things (people) go no matter how many fake smiles it takes.

I've learned that mentally it hurts like hell, but physically it only burns for a while. Meanwhile you are being scolded for life. The more you continue letting people bring you down, the more people will think of you as weak and hurt you even more. You might think you're doing the right thing, but there comes a time when you're letting the people you hate the most or trusted the most beat you down.

The more you think about it, everything becomes slow and unexpected. People leave you repeatedly until you realize that you're a nobody. You get misunderstood by your actions. Some people can think you are suicidal, and others may think you are just hurt mentally and physically...

Someone once said to me that no one understands me; you don't even get me. I kept that in. It stings just thinking about it, no matter how much you try to bring happiness to others, you mess up. "Am I just a simple mistake huh?" I thought to myself repeatedly, those words mean something till this day but what's there to change that?"

Here's my last perspective on resilience. Just this weekend I spoke at a church in The Bahamas on the topic, "Mental Health and Spiritual Wellness." I did my best to show how mental health impacts spiritual wellness and spiritual wellness impacts mental health and resilience. Spirituality is what gives you a sense of value and purpose in life.

What's the difference between spirituality and being religious? Psychologist Dr. Dan Brennan states: "Contrary to what many people might think, spirituality and religion are not the same. But they are linked. You can be spiritual without belonging to a specific religion. Religious people follow a particular faith and may be connected with specific groups or traditions." So isn't this saying that being religious does not in itself make one spiritual. . . Spirituality can help you deal with stress by giving you a sense of peace, purpose, and forgiveness. It often becomes more important in times of emotional stress or illness."

A point I stressed is that when one is religious (following a set of rules and practices) without being spiritual (the capacity to deepen connections with other people; experiencing compassion and empathy for others), there is a greater chance of becoming a religious fanatic or not being able to bounce back during tough times because one must follow strict rules. The end results are depression, confusion, disillusionment, etc.

Let's make real applications here. I am going to share with you a few scenarios, to help you understand how we can cause emotionally and spiritually well persons to lose hope and become physically or emotionally ill and stifle resilience:

1. Your 32-year-old daughter is living with you at home. She has completed college. She has a good job, car, bank account, and is a part of Adventist Community Services and Rotary Club. She is an active Adventist and enjoys singing in the choir. The Problem: The parents constantly ask her: “Where have you been? Why did you come home late? Why did I not see you in Church yesterday? Who was that man you were with? These kinds of questions make her feel like she is not being respected as an adult. She soon begins to doubt herself and her faith. Then she becomes depressed until she is able to break free from the cause of this pain—her parents.

2. You believe your fourteen-year-old son who sings in the church choir and loves to pray has homosexual tendencies. You ask him about it, and he confesses. Then the torment begins. You feel it is your spiritual duty to keep him on the “straight and narrow,” so you start with a barrage of threats: “You are going to hell. It is an abomination. When you become 18 years old you are out of this house, and I do not want to see you again.” These statements can lead him to become depressed, have suicidal thoughts, and withdraw from the world.

3. Your 18-year-old daughter, in the final grade of high school has a boyfriend. You told her from a small child that school and romance do not go together. You stressed to her that she is to have no romantic relationships. Now you find out that she likes a 21-year-old young man. You also find out that he is a Rasta and smokes marijuana. Then the threats, put downs, and shaming begin. The daughter starts sneaking out at nights. “If you bring that dirty, stupid boy home to this house you will regret it.” This beautiful daughter who sings in the choir, and enjoys listening to Dr. Michael Toote on Sabbaths, now is not enthusiastic about coming to church. The taunts and shame continue. Eventually she becomes depressed. Her self-esteem lowers and she thinks about suicide.

In all three of these cases, the persons are connected to Jesus and are happy church goers (initially). Their feelings for the church and spirituality begin to change because of how they are being treated. They lose hope and inspiration. The treatment impacts their cognitive ability. They become depressed. Their eating habits are changed. Their interest in church activities is diminished. In other words, their mental and spiritual health starts to weaken. Thus, their physical health is impacted.

These are just some of the stupid things parents do to drive their children crazy. In all three of these cases, the parents are more concerned about their status and reputation in the church and community than the wellbeing of the child. Here are better approaches:

“Dear child (son or daughter), I have a few concerns about the choices you are making. I want to keep the door of communication open between us. I want you know that I do love you and want the best for you. I notice you are staying up late at night on the phone talking to a man. That concerns me and I notice it is impacting your grades. I would like to meet him. Invite him to our home next Saturday night with three other teens so I can meet him.”

Or to the son, “I’ve noticed that your behavior is changing to become more like a girl. How long have you been feeling this way? What do you want me to understand about your feelings? I want you to feel comfortable to talk with me at any time.”

Did you notice the connection between mental health, spiritual wellness and resilience?

This brings me to the end of my presentation. I am open for questions.

I hope my sharing today from a different perspective on mental health and resilience was helpful. I thank the organizers for giving me the opportunity to share on the topic. Have a good day.