



THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE  
FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

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CENTRE CANADIEN DE RESSOURCES  
POUR LES VICTIMES DE CRIMES

# RESILIENCY

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## ***What is Resiliency?***

Resiliency can be described as a person's ability to maintain a balanced state in the face of challenges.<sup>1</sup> When a person experiences a tragic event like a violent victimization, they are faced with many such challenges. Routine tasks such as getting up in the morning can become difficult for them. Resiliency can also be viewed from a 'quick recovery' perspective, in which the person is able to process and come to terms with what has happened, and can quickly and successfully handle it.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Why is Resiliency Important?***

Every person handles stress and trauma differently. Crime victims experience various levels of resiliency: a wide range of reactions, positive and negative patterns of coping, and different abilities to move on.<sup>3</sup> It is useful to view resiliency as a continuum: each victim has diverse strengths and abilities that increase or decrease their resiliency.<sup>4</sup>

When a person faces adversity, such as sickness, or the loss of a loved one, the way in which they respond and/or cope is highly important. Every individual has the capacity to "bounce back", the ability to regain control of their life. For crime victims, resiliency is about being able to cope with problems that arise in life, no matter how minor or severe; and, also, being able to create positive coping methods. When a person is able to find ways to cope with difficult situations, they tend to emerge from the problem stronger than they were beforehand.

## ***Types of Support***

When something unexpected or tragic happens to a person, it is important for them to have a strong support network in order to become resilient. There are two types of support:

- natural support (family or friends); and
- professional support (legal, police or mental health services).

It is important to keep friends and family around us when times are tough; they will be able to offer comfort and support.

When family-members or friends of crime victims provide support, they help the victim in several ways:

- They may provide insight into the incident
- They may help the victim come to terms with certain aspects of their tragedy

- They may provide companionship, emotional support, and/or a sense of reality in order to help the victim cope.<sup>5</sup>

It is up to the victim to determine what kind of support they need; however, research has shown that those who have more natural supports are also more likely to seek professional help.<sup>6</sup>

In order to cope with a traumatic event, it is vital for crime victims to have a solid foundation of support. Often, families must go into “survival-mode”, attempt to pick up the pieces, and try to cope after experiencing a tragedy. Having good and loving relationships with friends and family helps to diminish the impact of difficulty, and increases feelings of self worth and self confidence.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Characteristics of Resiliency***

Literature on resiliency suggests that it is fairly common.<sup>8</sup> Research suggests that many victims of crime go on to live healthy lives without developing any mental health problems<sup>9</sup>, and many do not even need to access professional services.<sup>10</sup>

There are several factors that are related to overcoming challenges successfully. Qualities such as hardiness, autonomy, and self confidence have been identified as skills that give a person the life that they want. Hardiness is comprised of three components: finding a purpose in life, the belief that one can influence their environment and events, and the belief that positive and negative life experiences are growth opportunities.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when a victim encompasses these attributes it makes it easier to overcome the traumatic event they have experienced.

The literature on resiliency has listed multiple ways that a victim can cope positively. For example, a victim of assault may choose to register for self-defence classes<sup>12</sup>, or may decide to lay charges against their offender.<sup>13</sup> Many victims of crime choose to become activists and/or victims’ advocates. Victims have much to offer when they become either an advocate or an activist. They may share their experiences with others, or illustrate how victims of crime are dealt with within the Canadian criminal justice system. Furthermore, by becoming an activist, the victim may garner a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their life.<sup>14</sup>

### ***A Positive Outlook and Adaptability***

Another key element of resiliency is the ability to have a positive personal identity. A positive personal identity allows a person to stay focused during a challenge or traumatic experience. Those who have a positive personal identity are better

equipped to handle the curve balls that life throws at them, compared to someone who holds a very negative view of themselves.<sup>15</sup>

When a person faces a traumatic experience, it can be difficult for them to stay on track. People who are adaptable or can adjust to everyday difficulties have a better chance of coping compared to those who cannot. Adaptability can be either emotional or psychological. For example, a person may come to the conclusion that everything happens for a reason, or they may discover a positive aspect of what has happened to them.<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect of being adaptable occurs when a person has to change their path or go off course. Say a person was planning to go to a support group, and it got cancelled. Instead of doing nothing, they might choose to visit or talk with a friend on the phone, or to go for a walk. It is an ability to adapt to quick changes that allows a person to cope with challenges in a productive manner.

### ***Spirituality and Religion***

Moving away from a behavioral or emotional approach to healing, spirituality/religion is another avenue to which victims may look when they are attempting to cope with challenges. Based on limited research that has been conducted related to spirituality and healing, a few questions have arisen:

- a) How do people use spirituality to cope with violence and trauma?
- b) Does spirituality help protect mental health following traumatic events?
- c) How do such events affect spirituality?<sup>17</sup>

Literature on spiritual and religious coping suggests that there are two types of spiritual coping: positive and negative. Positive spiritual coping is comprised of forgiveness, spiritual connection and support. Negative spiritual coping includes the belief in a punishing God, the reappraisal of God's power, and spiritual discontent. Therefore, the more positive in their spirituality a person is, the more they may use spirituality to help them cope.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Ways to Build Resiliency***

- **Refrain from seeing crises as overwhelming problems:**  
People in the act of coping must try to change the way they respond to stressful or harmful situations. It is important to try to look beyond the moment, to find some positive in the future.

- **Accept that change is a part of life, a part of living:**  
There are some things in our lives that we cannot change or alter. A person who has experienced trauma or tragedy must, over time, try to concentrate on the attainable.
- **Find opportunities for self-discovery:**  
Going through a traumatic experience can be very difficult; however, some may find that they have grown and changed as a direct result of what has happened to them.
- **Taking care of ourselves:**  
Taking care of ourselves is vital when tragedy occurs. It is easy to forget, but important when trying to be resilient. Taking walks, writing our thoughts in a book, or talking with friends or family can help with situations that require resilience.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Places to Look for Help***

There are a variety of outlets that can be used, other than family and friends, when a person experiences a traumatic event in their life.

- **Self help and support groups**  
Self help and support groups can help a person cope with what has happened to them. It allows them to discuss their thoughts and feelings about what has happened. Furthermore, they can hear testimonials from others who have gone through similar circumstances.
- **Books and other publications**  
Reading about how others have overcome adversity can be very empowering. It can allow the reader an opportunity to relate, and to invoke some of the same measures to increase their own resiliency. Online resources can be just as beneficial as reading books and other publications.
- **Licensed mental health professionals**  
A mental health professional is qualified and equipped to help people in crisis move along the path to recovery. They help get people's lives back on track, so that they are able to function "normally".<sup>20</sup>

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