



**CENTRE CANADIEN DE RESSOURCES POUR
LES VICTIMES DE CRIMES**

**THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE FOR
VICTIMS OF CRIME**

RESILIENCY

This paper is intended as a general guide for people who may become susceptible to crime or for victims that are already involved in the criminal justice system. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you require clarification, or for a referral to an agency in your community that may be able to provide services to you. We encourage victims to verify the authenticity of any information within this paper with their service providers prior to engaging/using the service suggested within.

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What is Resiliency?

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime wants to encourage victims of crime to actively pursue their healing journey. Resiliency can be described as a person's ability to find balance and a sense of normalcy or control in their life following a traumatic experience. When a person experiences a tragic event they are faced with many challenges: just getting up in the morning can prove to be difficult for them.

Quite often, the term resilience is used out of its proper context. Its definition has changed over time to refer not only to characteristics of an individual, but to an outcome and a process. In this way, resilience can be seen as more than an attribute that a person either has or does not. It is also the demonstration of positive outcomes despite a traumatic or adversarial experience, or the process of adapting positively to this adversity. Both of these definitions imply that a degree of subjectivity is necessary in not only deciding what changes are classed as positive ones, but in the definition of resiliency as a whole¹.

When measuring resiliency, it is important to look at the individual's positive functioning despite the trauma they may be facing at the time or have faced in the past. This positive functioning may appear differently in each person, but overall, a positive outlook or action despite adversity should be seen as resilience.

Why is resiliency important?

Every person is different in the way they navigate through experiences of stress and trauma. Crime victims experience various levels of resiliency and a wide range of reactions which may include both positive and negative coping, and the ability to continue after their experiences of trauma and victimization. It is useful to look at resiliency as a continuum, where each victim has diverse strengths and abilities that increase their ability to maintain a sense of positivity in the face of their trauma².

What is important when a person faces adversity, whether we get sick, or a loved one is taken from us, is how a person responds and what they do from there. Each individual has the capacity to move forward and be able to regain control of their livelihood. For crime victims, being resilient is about being able to navigate through problems that arise no matter how minor and severe; and being able to create positive ways to manage with them. When you are able to find ways to help navigate through a difficult situation, you will find you are able to emerge stronger than before.

Types of Support

When something unexpected or tragic happens to a person it may be helpful for them to have a strong support network in order to become resilient. There are three types of support;

- natural supports (family or friends);
- professional supports (lawyer, police or mental health services); and
- community supports/resources (victim services, resource centres)

It is important to acknowledge your support system when times are tough because they will be able to offer comfort and support.

Natural supports, or people who are close to the victim, are there to provide support to the victim and are able to help them in several ways. They are able to provide an outside perspective on the matter and perhaps help the victim talk through certain aspects of the tragedy with a sense of trust and safety. They can provide companionship, emotional support, and acceptance of the victim, which allows the victim to feel more comfortable to work through their trauma at their own pace³. It is up to the victim to decide what kind of support they want to have, however; research has shown that those who have more natural

¹ Roebuck, B. (2014). Exclusion and Resilience: Exploring the decision-making processes of young people who are homeless. PhD diss., University of Ottawa.

² Ibid.

³ Everly, G.S., Flannery, R.B., and Mitchell, J.T. (2000). Critical incident stress management (CISM): A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 5: 23-40.

supports are also more likely to seek professional help⁴. Not all victims require professional help or formal support services, but those who do report greater success with their trauma and resiliency when they access those services.

After a traumatic event it is important to have a solid foundation of support. Families may have to reevaluate how they connect with one another, how they move through each day, and how they rely on each other. Having good and loving relationships with friends and family can help a victim to feel more confident in acknowledging and working through their trauma⁵.

Characteristics of Resiliency

Literature on resiliency suggests that it is more common in victims of crime than one may assume. Research shows that many victims of crime do recover and go on to live healthy lives without developing any mental health problems⁶ and many do not even access services⁷. As mentioned previously, not every person feels the need to access formal services, as many find they are supported by friends, family, religious groups, and other natural supports. Though these services may be able to connect a victim with the contacts they require or provide assistance themselves, it is not the only road to recovery and victims should not be forced to access them or to avoid them.

There are several factors that are related to overcoming challenges successfully. For example, hardiness, autonomy, and self confidence have been identified as factors of resilience. Hardiness is comprised of three components; finding a purpose in life, the belief that one can influence the environment and event, and the belief that positive and negative life experiences are growth opportunities⁸. This means that it is important for a victim to regain control over their own lives and their own decisions that they may have lost during their victimization. They should be able to recognize and enforce their own agency. Therefore, when a victim encompasses these attributes, or when a support system encourages the victim to take part in their recovery, a victim may feel more comfortable in navigating through their trauma.

The literature on resiliency has listed multiple ways that a victim can recover positively. For some, taking part in activities that reinforce their sense of personal strength are helpful in encouraging wellness⁹. For others, the victim may want to pursue legal action or lay charges against the offender¹⁰. Some victims become advocates or activists, wanting to help other victims in the way they have been helped, or fight for victims' rights. They share their experiences for others and illustrate how victims of crime are dealt with within the Canadian criminal justice system¹¹. Victim recovery is specific to each victim as there is no specific set of steps that someone can follow and expect to recover.

A Positive Outlook and Adaptability

Moreover, another key element in 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, for example, believe that I am a good person may have more self confidence to move forward with the belief that they will be able to lead a positive life after their trauma.¹²

When a person faces a traumatic experience it can be difficult for them to stay on track. Though the road ahead may still be daunting and unsure, people who have shown to be adaptable and not easily dissuaded may be able to better accommodate the changes they will face in life as a result of the trauma. This is because a person's life after the trauma will be different, no matter how large or small the crime

⁴ Norris F.H., Kaniasty, K., and Thompson, M.P. (1997). The psychological consequences of crime: Findings from a longitudinal population-based studies. In *Victims of Crime*, ed. R.C. Davis, A.J. Lugio, and W.G. Skogan, 146-166. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications

⁵ Siebert A. (2005). *The Resiliency Advantage*. Bennett-Koehler Publishers.

⁶ Ozer, E. J., Best, S. R., Lipsey, T. L., and Weiss, D. S. (2003). Predictors of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Symptoms in Adults: A Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 129. 1: 52-73.

⁷ Gannon, M. and Mihorean, K. 2005. Criminal victimization in Canada, 2004. Juristat. Vol. 25, no. 7. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 85-002-XIE. Ottawa.

⁸ Hill, J. K. (2009) "Victimization, Resilience, and Meaning-making: Moving Forward in Strength". *Victims of Crime Research Digest*. 2: 1-9

⁹ Hagemann, O. (1992). Victims of violent crime and their coping processes. In *Critical issues in victimology: International Perspectives*, ed. E. Viano, 58-67. New York: Springer Publishing.

¹⁰ Greenberg, M.S., and Ruback, R.B. (1992). *After the crime: Victim decision making*. New York: Plenum Press.

¹¹ Bonnano, G.A. (2004) Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist*, 59, 1, 20-28.

¹² Bonanno, G.A. (2005). Resilience in the face of potential trauma. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, 3, 135-138.

was. Acknowledging that these differences are okay and that they are still a good person despite how they may feel at the moment can help a victim with the unpredictability of life after trauma.

Another aspect of being adaptable is when you have to change your path or go off course. An example of this would be if a person was going to a support group and it got cancelled. Instead of doing nothing, you could choose to visit or talk with a friend on the phone, or go for a walk. It is the ability to adapt to quick changes that allows a person to cope with challenges in a productive manner.

Ways to Build Resilience

- **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 life 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 that provide for self-discovery:** Going through a traumatic experience can be very difficult, however some may find that they learned something new about themselves as a direct result of what has happened to them. For example, they may now be able to realize the personal strength or outside support systems that they have available to them in times of tragedy.
- **Taking care of ourselves:** Taking care of ourselves is vital when tragedy occurs. It is easy to forget, but important and can foster resiliency. Taking walks, writing their thoughts in a book, or talking with friends or family can help a person understand their own resilience¹³.

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 understand 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 a similar circumstance and ask questions about others' healing journeys and positive coping strategies they may have used. For those who have religious or spiritual beliefs, faith based supports are often available.
- **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.
- **A licensed mental health professional:** A mental health professional is qualified and equipped to help people in crisis, move along the path of recovery. Mental health professionals help many people manage and work through their trauma, but they are not an immediate and fail-safe source of recovery¹⁴.

¹³ American Psychological Association: Help Centre. (2007). The road to resilience. [Brochure].

¹⁴ Ibid.

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