



National Resilience Resource Center

Bonnie and Kathy's Corner



Exploring the Black Box of Resilience: Unraveling Mysteries

"We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows."

- Robert Frost, 1875-1963

"The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery everyday. Never lose a holy curiosity."

- Albert Einstein, 1879-1955

Most resilience research is very descriptive about what individuals look like and what environments influence good outcomes. At a deeper level how does that happen? People talk about the "black box" of resilience. "What is that process?" Ultimately the question arises, "Why is it that tortured people in concentration camps could still love, forgive and transform pain even into joy, and oppression into forgiveness?" This is an internal, spiritual process giving an unexpected meaning to such life experiences.

In reviving "Bonnie's Research Corner" we are keenly aware that the secrets of resilience are more valuable today than ever before. Global conditions, personal stresses, technological advances, and demographic changes of almost incomprehensible proportion demand nothing less than our best efforts to understand what we have come to call the "black box" of resilience. This electronic bulletin is one attempt to disseminate information designed to help unravel the mystery of what brings out the best in young people, adults, and in the systems that touch their lives.

Need to Know

We are living in a time of paradox. In the midst of grave challenges in every social arena, scientific

knowledge is exploding. There is also growing interest in such issues as quality of life, wellness, spirituality, and positive psychology emerging in professional, personal, public policy, organizational and other sectors. As Parker Palmer (1993) noted a decade ago, "Educators [and human service providers] of all sorts are in real pain these days, and that pain has compelled them to explore unconventional resources. When suffering becomes intense, we are forced to examine the deeper dimensions of our condition and to consider sources of insight that may have seemed uncouth" (pp. ix-x).

Welcoming the Unknown

This pressing need to know how to craft a better future for ourselves and those we serve led Palmer in 1998 to write, "The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes" (p. 5).

This existential part of the "black box" of resilience involves, among other things, the spiritual, psychological, mental emotional, and bioneurological dimensions of human nature and development. Some of the most significant answers will surely come from explorations of this formless

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and historically elusive domain. Jane Goodall says, "Science does not have appropriate tools for the dissection of the spirit" (p. 165). The ever-unfolding study of these abstract aspects of human nature is, however, making critical strides forward. Even a brief sampling of this research and practice reveals intriguing possibilities for unraveling the mystery of resilience.

Pioneering Work

After decades of exploration, resilience researcher Ann Masten (2001) states:

The great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena. . . . Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from ordinary everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. This has profound implications for promoting competence and human capital in individuals and society (pp. 227, 235).

This *ordinary magic* we call the common human capacity for natural resilience, is described in various ways by surprisingly varied, cutting-edge thinkers, researchers, and practitioners.

Security expert Gavin de Becker (1997) helps people predict violent human behavior and tells clients, "Like every creature, you can know when you are in the presence of danger. You have the gift of a brilliant internal guardian that stands ready to warn you . . . and guide you through risky situations . . . it is in you" (p.7- 8).

Psychiatrist David Hawkins (1995) notes, "The individual human mind is like a computer terminal connected to a giant database . . . to be a human is to participate in the database" (p. 12). Hawkins uses kinesiological tests to document that, "This is indeed an astonishing discovery, bearing the power to change lives, both individually and collectively, to a degree never yet anticipated" (pp. 12-13). Community psychologist Roger Mills (2001) refers to the *wisdom within*. Clinician George Pransky (1998) notes it manifests as *innate mental health*. Harvard

University researcher Herbert Benson (1996) documents the existence of a human "relaxation response"—a sense of inner well-being that is our biological heritage as is the human "fight-or-flight" stress response.

Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (2001) say their study of resilience of 489 subjects in Kauai for 40 years ". . . taught us a great deal of respect for the self-righting tendencies in human nature and for the capacity of most individuals who grew up in adverse circumstances to make a successful adaptation in adulthood" (p. 166).

Where can we look to understand the process of self-righting? Michael Rutter (1987) points to protective mechanisms. These include internal "appraisal and cognitive processes," ie., thinking, whereby the individual ultimately decides how to respond to the external world (p. 325).

We believe this internal natural capacity for common sense and resilience is the active ingredient or protective mechanism essential for good human and societal outcomes. It warrants significant study.

Physicist David Bohm, most known for explorations of dialogue in groups, contends

. . . there's something we don't understand about how thought works We have got to do something about this thought process—we can't just let it go on destroying us. . . . we want to see something about thought: we not only want to talk about thought and think about thought, but we want to see something about how thought actually works—beyond the word Everything depends on thought—if thought goes wrong, we're going to do everything wrong. But we are so used to taking it for granted that we don't pay any attention to it" (pp. 49-50).

Sydney Banks (1998) calls thought the *missing link*. Our own work at the National Resilience Resource Center shows promising results from tapping individual and systemic resilience using a thought-based approach called Resilience/Health

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Realization (Marshall, 2002). Palmer (1998) calls this black box the *inner landscape* of teachers' lives.

The studies of brain, mind, sense of self, and soul are also relevant. Antonio Damasio (2002), M.D. and Ph.D., heading the University of Iowa College of Medicine, and specializing in neurological disorders of mind and behavior, concludes the brain creates mind. His research suggests human beings operate in such a way that the brain tells us—*presents* information—that we are

. . . the owner of the mental process. It volunteers an answer to a question never posed: To whom is this happening? The sense of self is thus created, and that forms the basis for the first-person perspective that characterizes the conscious mind (p. 9).

And, for those who are fearful, he says understanding the “*movie-in-the-brain*” (p. 7) as mental process or thinking rooted

. . . in biological tissue will not do away with the mind and the awe for it By understanding the mind at a deeper level, we will see it as nature's most complex set of biological phenomena rather than as a mystery with an unknown nature. The mind will survive explanation, just as a rose's perfume, its molecular structure deduced, will still smell as sweet (p. 9).

NRRC client experiences indicate that learning “I am the thinker. I have wisdom within, and I can notice myself creating experiences in-the-moment with my own thinking,” has been a tremendous help in tapping natural resilience and maintaining a secure state of mind (Marshall, in press).

Mapping the Agenda

What does the research agenda of the future need to do in order to address the depths of the “black box”? Are we prepared to discuss, measure and work with it? It's a challenge. It's about having a sense of your own meaning and a sense of your own identity. It's about feeling part of something bigger than you. It's hard to talk about. We're in the realm of the formless, and it will take some

careful attention in many fields to be able to attend to this uncharted territory.

Ann Masten (2002), representing a return to the study of good adaptation and development, suggests there are rich areas for advancing resilience research and understanding what works to promote favorable development. These include how naturally occurring resilience works, biopsychosocial interface, brain development and functions, and more. Furthermore, she states, “the classification systems for psychopathology need an overhaul” (p.86).

Martin Seligman (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), past president of the American Psychological Association, articulating a sea change says, “Psychologists need now to call for massive research on human strengths and virtues . . .The major psychological theories have changed to undergird a new science of strength and resilience” (pp. 7-8).

Finally, Michael Fullan (1993), known for probing the depths of educational reform explains, “When you go deeper you go different. What appears linear becomes a new world . . .By raising our consciousness and insights about the totality of educational change . . .we can do something about it . . .We need a new mindset to go deeper” (pp. vii-ix).

That is the purpose of “Bonnie and Kathy's Corner” – to go deeper, to explore the “black box” of resilience and to unravel the mystery.

It is in facing the unknown that we believe the most promising possibilities for the future of young people, adults, systems, and indeed, our world, will be discovered.

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NOTE: The National Resilience Resource Center revived a prevention favorite known as "Bonnie's Research Corner." Bonnie Benard and Kathy Marshall Emerson teamed up to offer an electronic public service bulletin called "Bonnie and Kathy's Corner" with succinct briefings on classic cutting edge resilience research and Health Realization developments, trends, issues and resources. Questions or comments may be directed to marsh008@umn.edu .

-- KME 2012