

Becoming More Resilient: The FOCUSSM Approach

Our mission at Fourth River Associates is to create resilience in individuals and organizations through workforce training and executive coaching. In recent years, research and practice in psychology have consistently shown that resilience can be learned. The American Psychological Association (APA) has identified 10 ways to build resilience (F1), and each is a teachable skill. When adversity strikes, people can learn to bounce back quickly and move on with their lives.

The Fourth River FOCUS approach makes learning to be more resilient a fun and manageable experience. In order to help our clients remember the basic resilience training ideas, we have simplified the resilience training principles into the five FOCUS categories: **F**lexibility, **O**ptimism, **C**onnectivity, **U**p-to-you and **S**pirit.

Flexibility. Just like the tree that can flex in a strong wind, people who can flex with changes or even disasters will out-survive those who can't. Flexibility is central to effectively adapting to the rapid changes in our personal and professional worlds.

Flexibility training includes exercises that alter our attitudes toward change and adversity. Through practice we can learn to accept changes as inevitable and to see adversities as challenges to be dealt with and overcome. We can learn to keep things in perspective. Yes, things can go wrong, sometimes horribly wrong, but the world has not yet come to an end, and there are coping skills we can learn and apply to get us through this bad situation, learn from it, and move on.

Being flexible also includes adjusting our behaviors to improve interpersonal relationships. We all have different personality styles, and conflicts can arise when we interact with those whose styles differ from our own. If we have an analytical personality style, impulsive people may seem dangerous. If extroverted, we may tend to discredit quiet people. If we're decisive, those who weigh every decision carefully can be viewed as standing in the way of progress.

Learning to respect the value in different personality types can lead to team-building opportunities and improve the overall efficacy of any group. Discovering one's own personality style and learning how to 'read' others' styles builds flexibility in interpersonal interactions. With flexibility exercises, we learn how to move out of our style's normal comfort zone and into the comfort zones of those we need to work with, resulting in improved communications, cooperation and understanding.

***The Road to Resilience brochure:**

download at:

<http://apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=6>

Optimism. Martin Seligman has said there are two ways of looking at life.(F2) When bad things happen, some people tend to see them as impersonal happenstance, a temporary setback and confined to just a

small part of their lives. These people we call optimists. Others have developed a sort of 'learned helplessness' and tend to view bad events in their lives as a personal attack, a permanent problem and pervasive-something that negatively impacts all aspects of their lives. These people we call pessimists.

This is important for many reasons. A pessimistic worldview negatively impacts our health-both physical and emotional. It can lead to depression and inertia because of feelings of powerlessness. Pessimists get sick more often, miss more days of work, are less engaged at work, have fewer friends and, on average, die earlier than optimists. Optimists usually accomplish more than pessimists because they can envision positive outcomes. They are our leaders, our innovators, our entrepreneurs. And they're a lot more fun to be with.

The good news is that because a good part of pessimism is learned (usually at an early age), people can relearn, through coaching and practice, to be more optimistic, which will benefit them in improving their health, attitude and leadership abilities. Exercises to train people to be more optimistic are a standard part of the FOCUS approach.

Connectivity. One of the key factors that can be used to predict how fast somebody will recover from a major life stress event like the death of a family member, a job loss, or a major financial reverse, is to simply to ask them to count up the number of people they can talk with about their personal feelings and experiences during and after the event. In general, the more confidants they have in their lives, the faster they'll recover. Unfortunately though, for a whole host of reasons, including frequent job changes, relocations, less time with family members and increasing economic pressures to work longer hours, people are becoming less and less connected with each other.

In Bowling Alone^(F3) Robert Putnam described a radical decline in connectivity of the American people over the past few decades as typified by the image of a lone bowler at the bowling alley because of decreasing membership in bowling leagues, other athletic groups, social clubs, and religious and political organizations. More recently, Miller McPherson, et al. found that Americans' mean confidant size (number of people they can or will discuss important matters with) decreased from an average of about three people down to only two people over the past 19 years, and the number of Americans who reported they had no confidants nearly tripled from 10 % in 1985 to 24.6 % in 2004^(F4). A very disturbing trend!

If we want to increase resilience, we need to reverse this trend. For this reason the FOCUS approach includes interactive exercises as well as self-directed exercises, designed to build and maintain our relationship skills. Every one of us can benefit from improving the skills we use to connect with others.

Up-to-you. William H. Johnsen's quote, "If it is to be, it is up to me.", has been described as the most powerful combination of two-letter words in the English language. Fortunately, many people do adopt some version of this saying and take responsibility for most aspects of their lives without giving it much thought. However, even these folks can be

taught to be more aware of their self-empowerment, so it can be augmented. But for others who tend to wait for someone else to tell them what to do, they will benefit even more by learning to be more self-reliant through training and coaching.

While it is true that well-run groups can be effective and productive, there comes a time when individual action is called for. In times of crisis or when innovation is needed or when the group loses its moral or ethical moorings, it truly is "up-to-you" to take charge. It's the job of the leader to accept responsibility and to take action (and by leader we mean everyone-CEO, manager, group leader or self leader). It's "up to you" to take charge of your life, personally and professionally.

The FOCUS approach teaches the value of adopting formal written goals and encourages working with a mentor or coach who will hold you accountable to accomplish them. People become more resilience as they take ownership of their lives.

Spirit. Spirit is an all encompassing term we use to include all beliefs and practices people adopt to take care of themselves. People who find meaning in their circumstances and feel a passion for their lives are more resilient. As a part of this meaning-making, we encourage people to adopt a faith perspective of whatever sort works for them.

In addition, there are many other practices that support our spirits. For example, meditation and guided imagery have been shown to be powerful in relieving stress, abetting healthy sleep, reducing chronic pain and supporting the mind-body connection to improve our overall outlook and state of being. For these reasons, the FOCUS approach includes exercises designed to further develop our appreciation for our individual and collective spirit.

FOCUS Approach Specifics. Fourth River Associates applies various components of the FOCUS approach in all of our work, with individuals and organizations. Our executive coaching is tailored specifically to an individual's strengths, needs, and current situation. An initial evaluation, which often includes a 360° feedback assessment, helps to target the coaching work.

In addition to our core resilience training program, we offer specific workforce training programs for organizations in topics such as conflict management, work/home balance, dealing with difficult or angry people, communications and emphatic listening skills, team-building, running effective meetings, goal setting, strategic planning, effective presentation skills, stress management and relationship building. The FOCUS approach and our overall resilience training system are included to some degree in all our training programs and workshops. Creating resilience is the foundation for all our work. Our goal is your success.

1. *The Road to Resilience brochure: download at:*
<http://apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/feature.php?id=6>
2. Seligman, Martin. E. P., *Learned Optimism*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991
3. Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000
4. McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew E. Brashears, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades.", *American Sociological Review*, 2006, Vol. June: 353-375