

Increasing Resilience – the Power of Positive Self-Statements

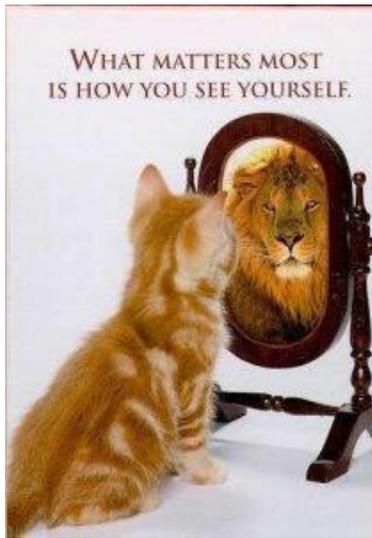
By Dr. Kirk Austin, Training Director

Resilience is a funny word. It means to bounce back, to rebound, or to recover. It is an essential life-skill that can lead to healthy identity development. Sarah Hamill believes that resilience typically refers to the development of competence in the face of adversity. More specifically, it refers to a dynamic process of positive adaptation and development while simultaneously facing a significant amount of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000).^[i] Simply put, resiliency is the ability to keep getting up, facing your storms and in the midst of raging dark thoughts and emotions that seem to ground us in lies, we choose to BELIEVE that we can change how we think, that we can believe that life can improve and that the future ahead can be altered with embracing positive, meaningful truths about ourselves and others.

I remember as a child having a toy called a “bobo doll”. Essentially, it was a blow-up punching bag toy that looked like a three-foot-tall clown. The bottom of the toy was filled with a weight of some sort that made the toy remain upright regardless of any rough play. I could hit the toy as many times as I would like, and each time it would bounce back to its original upright position. This is the idea behind resilience: that a person can learn to bounce back from adversity. Children need to learn this skill.

The truth is that often when we are exhausted, stressed, in pain, hurting, under duress and fatigued, most of us allow negative self-talk to rule our thoughts and mind. This is especially challenging if you are a caregiver or agency that works with someone affected by complex trauma. I AM HERE TO TELL YOU, THAT YOU ARE NORMAL. It is normal to experience discouragement and disillusionment. In the midst of challenging days, one of our greatest challenges to building resilience is this capacity to target negative self-talk. There is much research to support the claim that undisturbed negative self-talk can lead to a relentless downward spiral resulting in further despair and hopelessness. This can alter our ability to get up and continue to fight and believe for a changed outcome. However, positive self-talk can alter our perspective and give us hope towards change.

Kate’s foster parents spoke with us at our first CARE TEAM meeting. She was described as an emotionally devoid and depressed 11- year old. She had been through multiple placements and seemed to constantly criticize herself (almost as if she could do nothing right). As a result of this belief system about herself, she had decided to stop trying and further isolated herself, refusing to engage in any activities at all and spent hours in her room alone. The caregivers were at a loss as to how to connect with her and how to help build her self-esteem. They were sure that with increased self-worth, she could tackle some of the challenges in her life. The clinician on the care team suggested that these foster parents speak positive statements over their foster daughter every day – verbal and repetitive statements they could say to her, written truths that they could post on her mirror and in the bathroom, and activities that could help re-orientate her view and perspective of herself.



This self-talk has been scientifically proven to “improve your self-esteem, build your confidence, reduce stress, build optimism and protect yourself from depression.” [\[iii\]](#) So, when you are down, this is the time to consistently repeat statements that will ground your child and help them get back on track. It is also something, you can say to yourself. This enables you to be the best version of you! When implemented, you will have an increased energy to fight for those around you.

At our next meeting the following month, the foster parents reported a slight shift in Kate. Where she would first roll her eyes when they would say positive statements to her, they found that at the end of the month, she actually seemed to enjoy hearing these words of affirmation. They even caught her with a small smile on her face once. In fact, one of the by-products of this method, was that Kate for the first time in 6 months of her placement, came and sat next to the foster mother while watching TV. It seemed that this was building into the area of connection as well. Encouraged, both caregivers agreed that they would continue to practice and invest in Kate’s life through the use of resiliency statements and intentional affirmation.

Like most people, children attribute meaning to circumstances that happen to them. If they do poorly at school, they attribute that they are dumb. If they struggle with peers, they attribute that they should be rejected. If they live in a foster home and not with bio family, they may attribute that they are unlovable. Part of learning resilience is to reframe their interpretation of the meaning of the event from negative to neutral. By doing so, they make the event less personal, and less difficult. Sometimes, learning to reframe takes the help of adults. Adults can introduce alternative ideas, thoughts and meaning. Resiliency statements can help in this process. When a child feels that they are too small, an adult can suggest that “from a tiny acorn comes a MIGHTY OAK”. This creates hope in the child’s mind by creating a different spin on their size.

Resilience statements can help us in every aspect of our lives: as you pursue new goals, as you alter negative belief systems, as you undergo stressful life situations, as you get ready for a presentation or a trial with an impending judge, as you consistently face your difficult child, as you go through life altering moments of grief and loss; these statements are intended to help you view your current situation through a different lens. On the following page is a list of resiliency statements. An adult can help a child by reviewing and finding a statement that might help the child. When a child struggles with some aspect of their life, the adult can introduce it as a means to help build resilience. With repeated exposure, the child can begin using these ideas on their own.

- As a member of CTR (Complex Trauma Resources), there is an excellent video that targets how to implement resiliency statements each day. You can say this to yourself and you can say them to your child/youth. Check this out here: <https://www.complextrauma.ca/resiliency-self-talk-for-kids>

Resiliency Statements (These can be interchanged with You/I)

- You are special and unique/I am special and unique.
- You are beautiful/I am beautiful
- You can overcome anything/I can overcome anything.
- I have been given talents and gifts that I can choose to use every day (you can speak specifically into what these are)
- My ability to conquer my challenges is limitless; my potential to succeed is infinite
- I am courageous and I stand up for myself
- My fears of tomorrow are simply melting away
- I wake up today with strength in my heart
- I choose to embrace peace today
- I will choose to be grateful (list these blessings)
- One day at a time.
- I'm not here to be average. I'm here to be awesome.
- I choose to be brave and speak life-giving words.
- I know that even the darkest night will end, and the sun will arise.
- From the tiny acorn comes the mighty oak.
- To have access to our full Resiliency Statements, please click below. Please understand that membership is required to access this and clicking on the link below will provide access to this option in the sidebar: <https://www.complextrauma.ca/resiliency-statements-self-talk/>

References

[i] Hamill, Sarah K. "Resilience and self-efficacy: The importance of efficacy beliefs and coping mechanisms in resilient adolescents." *Colgate University Journal of the Sciences* 35.1 (2003): 115-146.

[ii] "The Importance of Self-Talk" <http://examinedexistence.com/the-importance-of-positive-self-talk/> Web. 18 Jan. 2016.