

# Hard-Wired to Bounce Back

## A National Expert on Resiliency Shares 4 Protective Factors

Nan Henderson

### hard-wired

1. To connect by electrical wires or cables
2. To put into effect by physiological or neurological mechanisms; make automatic or innate

Have you ever felt so badly about something that you thought you could never recover? And then, over time, did you notice that you did heal and begin to bounce back? It turns out that we humans may be hard-wired to bounce back from adversity. Research shows that people have an innate “self-righting” ability. In my work as a resiliency trainer, I have learned a lot about how to support this ability—so that individuals, families, and communities are better able to bounce back after suffering a setback.

Here are four basic approaches that support the development of “protective factors” so that more people will find it easier to recover from crisis, stress, and trauma.

### 1. Communicate “The Resiliency Attitude”

The first protective strategy is communicating the attitude, “You have what it takes to get through



*Danielle Thomas’s brother reminded her, “You can do it!” (see p. 15).*

this!” I interviewed a young man who had lived a painful life full of loss and abuse. Most of his adolescence was spent in one foster home after another. He told me that what helped him the most in attaining his own resilient outcome were the people along the way that told him, “What is right with you is more powerful than anything that is wrong.”



*Juan Berenguer discusses what it means to bounce back (p. 44).*

### 2. Adopt a “Strengths Perspective”

A school counselor told me recently how she applied this approach. A high school student was referred to the counselor because the girl was failing two subjects, math and science. Normally, the counselor would immediately confront the student with the problem—in this case two failing grades. Instead, she opened her session with this question: “Sandy, I have learned a little about your life. Tell me, how have you managed to do as well as you have done?” Sandy immediately burst into tears. “Never in all my years has anyone acknowledged what it has taken just to get to school,” she said. Most of the rest of the session was spent identifying all the strengths and supports Sandy had used to “do as well as she had done.” Toward the end of the session, the counselor said, “Let’s talk about how you can use all these things to bring your grades up in math and science.”



*Marco Albarran—not a “drop-out” but a “family caretaker” (p. 3).*

### 3. Surround Each Person—as well as Families and Organizations—with all Elements of “The Resiliency Wheel”

The Resiliency Wheel is a synthesis of the environmental protective conditions that research indicates everyone can benefit from having in their lives. These six elements of protection are also extremely useful in assisting families and even organizations to bounce back from adversity.

- **Provide Care and Support.** Often simply providing a good listening ear is extremely resiliency-building. So is uplifting music, time in nature, or reading an inspiring book. Pro-

viding oneself and others with unconditional love and encouragement is the most powerful external resiliency-builder.

- **Set High, but Realistic, Expectations for Success.** Effectively using this strategy involves identifying and supporting steps in the right direction rather than demanding instant perfection. One middle school changed its “Honor Roll” program to an “On A Roll” program. In order to be recognized as “on a roll,” students needed to show improvement.
- **Provide Opportunities for “Meaningful Contribution” to Others.** Paradoxically, one of the best ways to bounce back from personal problems is to help someone else with theirs. A foster parent once told me that giving the boys in his care the opportunity to serve disabled vets at the local community veterans’ center did more for the boys than any other strategy. Suddenly, these boys were in a new, and very healing, role. They were now *resources*, rather than *problems*. This strategy, he said, was life-changing.
- **Increase Positive Bonds and Connections.** People who are positively bonded to other people (through a network of friends, family, and organizations) and who share enjoyable activities do better in life.
- **Set and Keep Clear Boundaries.** Feeling safe, knowing what to expect, and not being overwhelmed also builds resiliency. This means developing or encouraging in others the ability to say “no” appropriately, to stand up for oneself when necessary, and to provide whatever means are needed to feel a sense of safety.



Carolyn Lomax gained strength to fight her own eviction by helping others fight theirs (p. 8).



Learn about “resiliency circles” and how they can reduce isolation (p. 20).

- **Develop Life Skills.** When encountering new adversity, try asking, “What life skills that I already have can I use here?” or “What new life skills do I need to learn?”



Terry Terflinger’s work ethic helped him when he started learning to read at the age of 59 (p. 52).

## 4. Give It Time

A resilient outcome requires patience. A few years ago, I interviewed Leslie, a young woman who had just finished the ninth grade on her fourth try! I asked Leslie how she was able to finally complete ninth grade. Leslie shared with me the two main reasons why she had made it: First, her single-parent mom, who refused to give up on her, even during the years she was skipping school, using drugs, and lying. Secondly, the small alternative school her mother had eventually found for her that embodied the four strategies outlined here.

“Where would Leslie be if she hadn’t had at least one person who stuck with her until she finally got through ninth grade?” I thought. Stories like this one have convinced me not to give up — on myself or on my friends and family who are going through hard times.

Some resiliency researchers theorize that these four conditions are actually basic human needs, similar to the need for food and shelter. We should identify, celebrate, and nurture these conditions in our personal lives, our schools, and our communities so that we can collectively help ourselves and others be more resilient.



The “road to success” was a long one, says Bernie Robinson (p. 28).

Nan Henderson, MSW, is the president of Resiliency in Action. This article is adapted from *Resiliency in Action: Practical Ideas for Overcoming Risks and Building Strengths in Youth, Families, and Communities*, published by <www.resiliency.com.> It has been adapted and used here with permission. All rights reserved. Her latest book, just published, is *The Resiliency Workbook: Bounce Back Stronger, Smarter & With Real Self-Esteem*.