Project Resilience: Preparing Youth to Respond to Adversity

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ABSTRACT: *In 2012, the state of Delaware experienced a major public health concern. During the first quarter of the year, eight adolescents and young adults died by fatal suicide attempts. Concerned public officials asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to assist with the epidemiologic investigation of these deaths. Mental health problems were found to be a significant contributing factor to the fatal suicide attempts. Responding to community need, Project Resilience was developed. Project Resilience is a community-based initiative designed to prepare youth and young adults to use their inner strengths and mobilize family, community, and cultural resources when faced with adversity. Grounded in an ecological perspective, Project Resilience is a strengths-based initiative which incorporates Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques. Pilot study findings are promising. Participants' scores on the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28) improved after completing the program. Project Resilience addresses barriers of the stigma of seeking mental health services and limited access to mental health services in rural communities.*

Keywords: *adolescents, mental health, trauma, resilience*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Between 1999–2014, suicide was the third leading cause of death for youth aged 10-24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). During the first quarter of 2012, eight adolescents and young adults (aged 13-21) died by suicide in the two most rural counties in the state of Delaware, Kent and Sussex. Four of the eight youth attended the same high school. Local officials became concerned because the number of deaths in this first quarter of 2012 exceeded the number of suicide deaths typically reported for this two county area and age group for the previous year (Fowler, Crosby, Parks, Ivey, & Silverman, 2013). State officials invited the CDC to assist with the epidemiologic investigation of these deaths. Mental health problems were a leading factor in the majority of the fatal suicide attempts (Fowler et al., 2013). Suicide often manifests from mental health problems, including depression (Smith, Buzi, & Weinman, 2001) or anxiety (Placidi et al., 2000). Between 2009-2013, approximately 6,000 or 9.7% of all adolescents in the state of Delaware had at least one major depressive episode. The majority, 54.9% or approximately 3,000 youth, did not receive treatment for depression (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2015).

Experiencing a crisis or traumatic event may be a catalyst for anxiety or depression (Black, Woodworth, Tremblay, and Carpenter, 2012; Cerdá et al., 2013; Cheever & Hardin, 1999). AResilient youth is better prepared to respond to adversity in healthy ways. Resilience is "both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2008, p. 225). Community-based, resilience interventions can prepare youth to respond to adversity, a crisis, or traumatic events in healthy ways (Burns et al., 2015; McArt, Shulman, and Gajary, 1999).The purpose of this paper is to explore the development and implementation of a community-based, resilience program to help youth understand how to tap into their inner strengths and family, community, and cultural resources when faced with adversity. Findings from a pilot study and future directions are also discussed.

II.   PROJECT RESILIENCE

The development and implementation of Project Resilience were made possible by funding from the Delaware Community Trust NEW GEN SOUTH initiative. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Delaware State University. Project Resilience endeavors to help youth (aged 7-21) utilize their inner strengths and mobilize family, community, and cultural resources in order to make healthy responses to adversity. It is a strengths-based model which is grounded in an ecological perspective and influenced by Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) techniques.

Strengths-based programming can prepare youth and young adults to make healthy responses to adversity. According to Brownlee et al., (2013), a strengths-based model advances optimal function in spite of initial exposure to adversity and trauma. "Strengths are at the core of positive youth development, which involves a youth's ability to survive adversity, minimizing mental and physical health problems, while more generally promoting personal growth and well-being" (Brownlee et al., 2013, p. 437). Barrett, Sonderegger, &

Xenos (2003) demonstrated the efficacy of a strengths-based intervention designed to advance social and emotional learning by developing protective factors. The clinical trial included 320 Australian youth and adolescents. Younger participants who received the intervention reported an increase in self-esteem, improvements of expectations for the future and a decrease in anxiety symptoms from pre- to post-tests. High school aged participants who received the intervention reported reduced levels of anxiety, depression, anger, post-traumatic stress, and dissociation from pre- to post-tests. Younger participants and high school waitlist participants reported no change in hopelessness or self-esteem and an increase in anxiety from pre- to post-tests (Barrett et al., 2003).

Strengths-based programming and resilience have also been addressed in the literature. For example, Chandler, Roberts, and Chiodo (2015) tested the feasibility and potential efficacy of a strengths-based intervention designed to build capacity by increasing resilience and health behaviors and decreasing symptoms and negative health behaviors with young adults, who have had adverse childhood experiences. The researchers used a randomly assigned two-group pre-test/post-test design to compare symptoms, health behaviors, and resilience before and after the intervention program. The sample was comprised of females, between 18-24 years of age, and enrolled in an undergraduate program in the northeast.The participants in the intervention group reported building strengths, reframing resilience, and creating support connections. Thus, results of this study provide preliminary evidence that a strengths-based intervention may have a greater effect on promoting health behaviors (an indication of resiliency) than reducing risks or symptoms (Chandler et al., 2015).

In addition to being a strengths-based program, Project Resilience is also undergirded by an ecological perspective. The ecological environment as conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner consists of four environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. "A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). This system is one in which the individual spends considerable time, and direct interactions take place with family, peers, and school. For example, family and peers can be sources of comfort for youth during times of adversity. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), "a mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (p. 25). This system serves as a linkage between microsystems. For example, youth interact with their families and peers. Families interact with the places of worship and civic groups. Places of worship can help youth positively cope with adversity. "The exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). For example, if a child has a parent whose work hours have been changed. The child may be impacted by having to spend more time alone after school and not feeling safe during the parent's absence. The macrosystem system refers to the broader culture in which an individual lives and includes society's values and customs. A united community can help mediate the impact of adversity on youth who live in the community. The chronosystem, a fifth system, was proposed after Bronfenbrenner's initial work. This system characterizes the pattern of environmental events and transitions over the life course. Individual functioning and behavior are influenced by transition with physical and social factors in each system of the ecological environment.

The ecological perspective and resilience have also been explored in the literature. Greene (2014) argues that resilience rests on an ecological-systems conceptual base which explains how people adapt to stress and maintain their daily functioning. In this ecological perspective, resilience is broadly understood as the capability of a social or natural system to maintain function through periods of change, or, alternatively, to reorganize and adapt to meet new challenges (Lyon & Parkins, 2013). Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) used an ecological framework to identify qualities that are associated with resilience among a cohort of Native American teenagers. The researchers used a mixed-methods methodology, and the study took place on an Indian reservation in the upper Midwest. The community had a population of 904 residents and was steeped in poverty. The research was conducted at the high school with an enrollment of 416 students. Ninety-eight percent of the students were Native American. Also, students qualified for free or reduced lunches, and several of the students commuted 20 to 30 miles one way to attend school. Nine high school students who were identified by a teacher to be academically successful (a quality of resiliency), participated in the interview segment of the study. Interview and survey questions were developed by the lead researcher using a literature review of Bronfenbrenner's ecological subsystems. The participants were individually interviewed at their high school. Participants also completed a survey that followed the theme similar to the interview questions. Answers were coded according to Bronfenbrenner's subsystems.

The findings reveal the main areas examined within the microsystem were future expectations, self-concept, and family and peer support. Several trends were found in the mesosystem, including the relationships between parents or guardians and school, peers and school, and peers and parents or guardians. For example, Sixty-two percent (62%) of the students believed that their parents or guardians and teachers had a good relationship. Also, the resilient students' parents or guardians participated at the school. The exosystem dealt

with factors that indirectly impacted the adolescents. The extended family played an unusually important role in the Native American adolescents' lives. Many students chose a member of their extended family as a role model and during the interviews spoke of getting together with their role models on a regular basis. Considering macrosystem influence, the majority of students who were surveyed believed their community was very similar to other communities. The most prevalent challenge facing students in the chronosystem was the feeling of being judged by the majority white culture. During the interviews, many of the students spoke of being the victim of discrimination when traveling across county lines (Feinstein, et al., 2009). Project Resilience also embraces an ecological perspective for increasing resilience. The program recognizes resilience as a dynamic process that includes an individual's inner strengths, talents and abilities and family, community, and cultural resources.

Grounded in an ecological perspective, Project Resilience is a strengths-based, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is a psychosocial therapy that assumes that maladaptive, or faulty, thinking patterns cause maladaptive behaviors which are counterproductive and interferes with everyday living and well-being. Treatment focuses on replacing faulty cognitions or thinking patterns with positive ones in order to replace maladaptive behaviors with positive ones. CBT approaches have been successful in a myriad of difficulties ranging from anxiety (Goldin et al., 2016) to spinal cord injury (Craig, Hancock, Chang, & Dickson, 1998; Mehta et al., 2011). Moreover, CBT approaches have also been used successfully to increase resilience among diverse populations (Mirea, 2013; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011; Watson, Rich, Sanchez, O'Brien, & Alvord, 2014). For example, Padesky and Mooney (2012) developed a strengths-based CBT model to help clients strengthen personal resilience. The model encourages participants to identify personal strengths and apply their personal model of resilience to areas of life difficulty (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). Watson et al., (2014) examined the effectiveness of a resilience-based CBT group therapy on improving the social, emotional, and family functioning of anxious youth. The sample consisted of 22 youths aged 7-12 who had an anxiety disorder. The study utilized a quasi-experimental, non-controlled, non-randomized design. Participants completed therapy forms, including the Behavior Assessment System for Children, 2nd Edition, and the Social Skills Improvement System-Rating Scales before the start of the intervention and again at the conclusion of the 12-week treatment sessions. Findings from the study provide preliminary support for the effectiveness of the intervention for improving social, emotional, and family function among the study's participants (Watson et. al., 2014).

The CBT techniques used in Project Resilience include psychoeducation; cognitive restructuring; creative problem-solving and goal setting; homework; and journaling. Psychoeducation is an important instrument for engaging, motivating, and empowering individuals who have experienced adversity. It can be defined as any learning experience designed to facilitate voluntary behavioral changes that restore, improve, or maintain health and well-being (Cho, Torres-Llenza, Budnik, & Norris, 2016). According to Wessely, Bryant, Greenberg, Earnshaw, Sharpley, & Hughes (2008), psychoeducation can include "constructive information that proactively encourages an expectation of resilience and, if necessary, help-seeking behavior" (p. 296). Nam (2015) tested the efficacy of psychoeducation in a randomized controlled sample of bereaved individuals and supporters. The results showed that psychoeducation of supporters of bereaved individuals had significant beneficial effects. Specifically, symptoms of complicated grief were decreased in bereaved individuals with supporters who received psychoeducation (Nam, 2015). The psychoeducation component of Project Resilience prepares and encourages participants to mobilize their inner strengths and family, community and cultural resources during difficult times and consider creative, positive solutions to respond to adversity.

Another CBT technique used by Project Resilience is cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring teaches individuals to examine their automatic thoughts and recognize inaccuracies in their thought processes and helps them evaluate and modify their thoughts to be more realistic and helpful in order to promote positive changes in mood (Kennard, Mahoney, & Mayes, 2011). Researchers used cognitive restructuring to build resilience in a sample of adult mothers who had experienced childhood sexual abuse (Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). The researchers employed two common techniques of cognitive restructuring, "benefit-finding and meaning-making." Seen as coping strategies of cognitive restructuring, "benefit-finding can be thought of as 'seeing the silver lining' in a traumatic experience and meaning-making can be thought of as finding purpose, or a reason, for the traumatic experience" (Wright et al., 2007, p. 598). Finding benefits from experiencing a traumatic experience is one of the most common coping mechanisms for survivors of trauma (Wright et al., 2007). Survivors can create something good from a stressful or traumatic experience. Trauma researchers and theorists agree that searching for and finding meaning in a traumatic experience were significantly related to adjustment over time (Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). Many of the Project Resilience participants expressed that they have experienced trauma either directly or vicariously. The majority of the participants reported seeing images and hearing about fatal shootings and deaths of young African Americans. Project Resilience staff used cognitive restructuring to empower the participants to find benefit and make meaning out of those traumatic events. For example, participants spoke about how black communities are

unifying in response to the deaths of African American youth by calling for action to address racism, oppression, and police brutality.

Creative problem-solving and goal-setting techniques are also used by Project Resilience staff. The psychoeducational components of Project Resilience encourage and motivate participants to use their unique talents, strengths, and abilities, as well as family, community, cultural resources to think of creative solutions to everyday problems. For example, during one of the in-session activities, participants pick from a pile of cards which contain pre-printed scenarios that represent a combination of day-to-day and complex challenges. Participants are asked to provide creative, positive solutions to the problems identified in the scenarios. Goal setting is another important technique used by Project Resilience staff. Participants are asked to develop a vision or goal that may seem inconceivable, but can be pulled into the realm of reality through purposeful and deliberate action. Personal goals can motivate and serve as sources of inspiration and motivation during times of adversity.

Homework is a primary technique used in psychotherapy. In CBT, the homework tasks often evolve out of the therapy session and involve clients recording their thoughts and challenging them or participating in a task or activity to reduces anxiety (Beckwith & Crichton, 2014). Project Resilience participants are provided a notebook to complete homework assignments. The notebooks are for the participants to reflect on the information and activities presented during each session. Participants are invited to share their reflections at the beginning of the next session. Closely aligned with homework is journaling. According to Murray (1997), journaling is a narrative activity where the writer expresses subjective personal experiences without restrictions of writing conventions. Journaling can be used for personal growth and creative expression. Participants of Project Resilience are encouraged to use their notebooks to express their thoughts and feelings in creative ways, including drawings, poems, or symbols.

Embracing an ecological perspective, Project Resilience is a community-based initiative. Program staff partner with youth-serving agencies to deliver the program in community settings. The initiative is undergirded by four key principles: Community, Self-Righting, Creativity, and Vision. Focusing on these core principles allows participants to identify individual, relational, communal and cultural resources that can be mobilized during times adversity. The ecological perspective suggests that resilience is a dynamic process that happens in a social context called community.

Community: The social network comprised of our family, friends, neighbors, civic organizations, schools, and centers of faith is a community. At its best, the community is a broad base of strength to lean on when challenges arise. When we maintain strong connections with our community, we gain a sense of our place and purpose in the social fabric that surrounds us daily. For example, children who are positively motivated and mentored by adults in their community develop a greater sense of self-worth and belonging, and they tend to contribute more to the community's growth and development. During times of personal and community upheaval, the community is even more important to its vulnerable members, like children, who may feel more intensely disconnected and isolated.

Self-Righting: The unique way in which individuals apply their personal strengths to overcome challenge and loss is self-righting. An important part of self-righting is rootedness. Like a strong tree, self-righting reflects each person's sense of strength, calm, flexibility, and the confidence that she or he will be okay, no matter how hard the wind blows. Knowing and owning one's personal strengths are the first steps in mastering the art of self-righting. Individuals can adjust, recover, and move on from adversity when they discover how to use their personal gifts to gain meaning from painful experiences, to adapt productively, and, to ultimately, grow from the experience. Striking the right balance in applying personal assets is the essence of self-righting.

Creativity: Very important to resilience is the ability to bring creativity into problem-solving and conflict resolution. Creativity describes the ability to consider positive alternatives to challenges in order to make things work. When difficulties can be seen as challenges to overcome instead of obstacles to conquer, it is easier to find creative, ingenious alternatives to situations that may at first appear overwhelming. The more inventive we can be in mastering challenges, the greater our ability to bounce back and move forward.

Vision: The fourth element of Project Resilience is vision; the worldview individuals hold. A strong personal vision is a view of how the world works, and our place in the world and guides our sense of purpose. Through vision, a goal or dream that seems inconceivable can be pulled into the realm of possibility. Thus, purposeful and deliberate actions can turn personal visions into reality. The capacity for vision helps us to see ways to learn and grow from challenges and to find meaning in adversity.

Project Resilience offers six one-hour sessions. During each session, participants engage in activities designed to bolster understanding of their inner strengths, family, community, and cultural resources that can be

tapped into during times of adversity. The introductory session is called *Let's Make a Collage.* During this session, the facilitators assign the participants to groups and ask the groups to work collaboratively on a collage that expresses their understanding of the four elements of resilience. The goals of the introductory session are to build rapport among participants, establish the group as a community that will learn and grow together during the sessions, and help the facilitators foster participants' abilities to work cooperatively as a team. The structure for the sessions that address each of the four elements in greater detail entails a *joining*; a review and summation of the previous session, including a discussion about the assigned homework activity from the previous session; an in-session activity; and an assigned homework activity.

The intention of the *joining* is to establish a healthy rapport between facilitators and participants and to jumpstart an open exchange among participants. *Joinings* provide an opportunity to stimulate interaction for the day's session. For example, a possible *joining* could include asking participants to identify someone who they consider to be a role model in the community. The participants share the names and the qualities or characteristics that make those individuals good role models. Another purpose of the *joinings* is to bring everyone into a cohesive group, creating a healthier, more productive, and more engaged group environment.

The in-session activities support the session's learning objectives. For example, the learning objective for the community session is to understand the role of community in fostering resilience. An in-session activity might include dividing participants into three groups or communities. One group will be the sculptors, another, the storytellers, and the third group, the poets. The facilitator then suggests a community theme and asks each group to communicate the theme in a unique fashion. For example, the sculptors will mold each other into statuesque positions that express that theme. The storytellers will collectively compose a story about the theme. The poets, working together, will compose a poem addressing the theme. Creativity and artistic expression can support the therapeutic process (Stacey & Stickley, 2010).

Participants are also given a *resilience notebook*so they can record their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and challenges during the session, as well as for completing the homework activities**.** By journaling the participants can organize their thoughts and feelings into a sensible story in the face of adversity (King & Holden, 1998).A *resilience notebook* is a tool the participants can take with them after the program, to remind them and reinforce the lessons about discovering and using the elements of resilience to handle future challenges.

The final session is called *Celebration.* The goal of this session is to celebrate participants' accomplishments. The in-session activity is the have participants create a personal *resilience shield*. The participants are given a blank shield with four sections representing each of the Project Resilience elements: Community, Self-Righting, Creativity, and Vision. Participants may use words, drawings, or poetry to symbolize each element. The session ends with participants sharing their completed personal resilience shields.

III.   EVALUATION OF PROJECT RESILIENCE

The target population for this research is youth aged 7-21 who participated in community-based, youth-serving agencies in Kent and Sussex Counties (DE). Project Resilience reached over 150 participants. However, the project team was unable to collect data on all of the participants because, in some instances, agency policy prohibited collecting demographic information on clients, participants were younger than the target age range, some youth did not participate in the full six-session protocol and agency scheduling conflicts. The project team did not exclude any participants. The goal was to have broad-based community participation.

To assess the impact of Project Resilience on the participants for whom data was collected, (n = 35), the research team employed a pre- and post-test methodology. The research team administered the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28) to measure resilience. The CYRM-28 is an empirically validated twenty-eight item instrument designed to explore the understanding of the resources (individual, relational, communal and cultural) available to youth (Daigneault, Dion, Hébert, McDuff, & Collin-Vézina (2013); Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van (2012); Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). The findings from the pilot study are promising. After completing the Project Resilience program, participants were able to define, in their own words, the term resilience and articulate how they would use their inner strengths and family, community, and cultural resources if faced with adversity. Additionally, post-test scores on the CYRM revealed gains from pre-test scores.

IV.   DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the results are encouraging, the research team was met with some unforeseen challenges. The primary challenge was that many of the community partners had drop-in programs. A large number of participants did not experience the full six-session program. This made it difficult for the research team to collect pre- and post-test data. Scheduling was another issue. Often the research team had to modify the Project Resilience curriculum because the community partner offered competing programming. The team had to truncate the program to meet the partner's needs. This truncated program may have threatened the integrity of Project Resilience in some instances. A third challenge is that Project Resilience was designed for 7-21year-

olds. However, younger youth often participated. The research team had to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the younger participants and was not able to collect data from them. Also, one community partner did not allow the research team to collect demographic data on the participants because they were children of military families. Collecting demographic data violates agency policy. Despite these challenges, Project Resilience shows promise. Participants in the pilot study were able to articulate how they would use their inner strengths and other resources if faced with adversity. Additionally, post-test scores on the CYRM-28 revealed that participants increased understanding of individual, relational, communal and cultural resources that can be mobilized during times of adversity, stress or trauma. In the future, the research team plans to assemble a representative sample in which to test the efficacy of Project Resilience on the target population. Also, the research team will explore developing program curriculum that is age appropriate for younger participants.

Because Project Resilience is a community-based initiative and is not promoted as a mental health campaign, the barrier of the stigma associated with receiving mental health services is reduced. Internalized stigma of seeking mental health services is well documented in the literature (Lucksted & Drapalski, 2015; Pearl, Forgeard, Rifkin, Beard, & Björgvinsson, 2016; Turner, Jensen-Doss, & Heffer, 2015). Limited access to mental health services is another barrier. Community-based programming, including school-based, can increase the utilization of mental health services (Atkins et al., 2015; Bruns et al., 2016; Polo, Alegría, & Sirkin, 2012). The final phase of the Project Resilience initiative is to train community partners to deliver the program content and to be able to identify and refer youth who may benefit from more comprehensive mental health services. Also, community-based programming can play a pivotal role in providing resilience interventions (Anthony, Alter, & Jenson, 2009; Burns et al., 2015; Plough, et al., 2013). Project Resilience addresses a critical need by delivering community-based resilience programming in rural communities in the state of Delaware.

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