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Hidden pathways to resilience

How "delinquent" behaviour can be a good thing

BY DR. MICHAEL UNGAR

TORRIN TAKES UP SPACE. YOU NOTICE HIM WHEN he enters the classroom the two or three times a week he attends. Some students give him high fives; others shrink into their seats as he passes on the way to his desk in the back corner. Torrin is big – six-foot-three, 15-years-old. Everyone knows him including the police. He fights; he drinks; he smokes weed. He steals cars for money. He impresses everyone with his talent for getting in trouble. Only when he is sitting in class, his shoulders hunched over a tattered exercise book, does he look like the child he still is.

Torrin's delinquency and substance abuse are not without cause. Understood as a set of strategies to cope with an environment that presents Torrin with limited opportunities, his navigations through his community are best seen as reasonable adaptations. If we talk with Torrin, we'll hear that he is doing the best he can with what he's got. That means coping with a chaotic home life, a learning disability, multiple moves and the quiet neglect of two parents trying to keep their own lives together.

Current trends in counselling have seen a convergence of concepts that can help us work better with young people like Torrin. Resilience, strengths-based interventions, positive psychology, developmental assets and theories of thriving are combining to shift our emphasis towards young people's capacities to adapt and how youth make good use of limited resources. The focus needn't be on their problems alone.

Surveys of young people's strengths cluster capacities into internal and external resources. Work by Resiliency Canada shows that the more assets a child has, the more likely he or she is to develop pro-social behaviours. International studies, however, show that children's development of strengths is not linear. The turmoil of junior high school, for example, has been shown to deplete both internal resources like self-esteem and external resources like quality relationships with parents.

Resilience is an umbrella concept that accounts for positive developmental outcomes among children exposed to complex patterns of risk and the processes that protect children from developing badly when exposed to adversities like poverty and abuse. We once thought resilience was mostly an individual's capacity to survive and thrive. Thankfully, the term has been wrestled back from the neoconservative right who were looking for an excuse to put all the blame for Torrin's failings on Torrin.

Resilience is better understood as a balance between an individual's capacity to navigate resources and his or her environment's capacity to provide those resources in meaningful ways. Young people only take advantage of opportunities that mean something to them. Internalized mental schemas, reflecting culture and values, play a big part in what young people say they need to make their lives better.

Understanding Torrin's behaviour is easier when we look for signs of adaptation within a challenging environment – his hidden resilience. After all, Torrin occasionally attends school. He values the opinions of those around him (an audience to the stories he likes to tell about himself). He is goal directed, even if those goals are mostly antisocial. He maintains a sense of self-esteem through his problem behaviour. He likes showing off his strength and enjoys bragging about how much he can drink and smoke. Though he might deny it, he wants adults to notice him.

Torrin's hidden resilience is the place to begin if we as counsellors want to engage him in helpful conversations. What story does Torrin tell himself when he looks in the mirror? Who does he see? Someone strong? Respected by his peers? Feared?

If our goal is to help Torrin change, we must first understand that he secures through his behaviour access to four key messages: "You belong," "You're trustworthy," "You're capable" and "You're responsible." That Torrin hears these messages through his delinquency and self-harming behaviours shouldn't lead us to think he is necessarily failing. On the contrary, the challenge is to find sufficiently powerful substitutes to help Torrin hear these messages in socially acceptable ways.

In this sense, resilience is related to the opportunities young people like Torrin experience. The power of intervention is that it can provide youth with alternative paths to powerful identities. But the new stories they tell must be as powerful as those they leave behind.

Those stories aren't as difficult to create as one might think, though often they require convincing people to change their perceptions of youth like Torrin. With some help from his community, Torrin has found part-time work as a labourer. And because of his size, he has been asked to help monitor the door at a late-night facility where young people play basketball. At school, he is enrolled in a carpentry class where he and six other students are building a shed that will be auctioned off at a school fundraiser.

Torrin also sees a social worker at school, dropping by now and again to talk. By her office door she has wisely placed a mirror. Each time Torrin leaves, he glances at himself. Though Torrin never says anything as he walks away, his social worker has been wondering lately if he sees anything in the reflected image that he likes. Likes better than what he saw before. ■

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