Resilient Families

Why is it that some families seem to endure the worst things that life dishes out, while others seem to unravel at the first sign of trouble? In a word, the answer is resilience.

Resilience refers to internal strength and durability. In families it is evidenced by a sense of control over the outcomes of life and how the family unit responds to hard times. There are three major components of family resilience.

Cohesiveness

There are numerous positive adages about families who stick together, and rightfully so. Families with high cohesiveness count on each other to provide meaningful and tangible support, encouragement and even rebuke when appropriate. In other words, there is an assumed, unspoken level of trust and commitment to one another that seems to defy logic.

In times of adversity, others marvel at the apparent lack of distress observed in their friends or co-workers from cohesive families. This lack of distress should never be mistaken for a lack of concern. During tough times cohesive families communicate a consistent message: "I am here for you."

Researchers who have investigated women in labor can attest to the power of having a loved one present. Studies have consistently shown that women who have their husbands or other loved ones present during delivery report less distress and require less pain management than those women who are alone. Knowing that someone cares that you are hurting can make all the difference in the world.

Challenge

While it's true that there usually are enough challenges in daily living, resilient families seldom shy away from a challenge. In fact, what other families describe as a problem, resilient families, more often than not, describe as a challenge. It's their mindset. They tend to believe, in the humblest way, that they can overcome most obstacles in life. It is not that they feel overly confident in their talent or that they have special abilities. Resilient families possess a sense of purpose, perseverance and an uncanny understanding that by hanging together they can make their way.

A popular television ad epitomizes this type of family. It states, "Life's a journey—enjoy the ride." Resilient families accept that there are many obstacles and challenges in life. Instead of shaking their fist at them, they take them head on.

Hope

Losing hope during difficult times often signals the beginning of the end. When hope is lost, we tend to throw in the towel. Resilient families are known for their sense of hope, and for even "out hoping" others. One explanation is that they continually find things they can control when other things are tilting out of control.

When Joann's 79-year-old father was dying of lung cancer, there was little the family could do to stop it. However, they decided that there was plenty they could do to keep this illness from robbing them of the time they had left. So they planned parties and family celebrations to commemorate his life. Because he did not want to be in the hospital until the very end, the adult grandchildren took turns sleeping at his home to provide support to their grandmother. Although they accepted that his death was not in their hands, they never gave up hope that his remaining days could be filled with joy.

Unfortunately, there is no recipe for resilience. It is a character asset that some have and others lack. You can, however, learn a great deal from observing resilient families and asking how they respond to hard times.

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