

Family communication and resilience

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Families are influential for cultivating resilience in response to hardship or adversity. At the individual level, families provide a foundation for socializing children and arming them with the skills necessary to cope with stressors and recover from unexpected setbacks. In particular, parent–child communication is important for modeling appropriate responses to stressful circumstances and helping children develop their own effective strategies for coping with distress (e.g. Winslow, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2005). At a broader level, the entire family system can respond to trauma or crisis in ways that either reinforce or unravel the ties that bind it together. From a family systems perspective, family resilience refers to the processes that families enact to facilitate adaptation and adjustment in the face of significant adversity or crisis (Patterson, 2002). When faced with challenges, such as divorce, severe illness, economic hardship, or chronic substance abuse, resilient families search for ways to support individual family members, adapt to unexpected events, and find meaning in difficult experiences (e.g. Huthinson, Afifi, & Krause, 2007; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). I begin by describing the features of parent–child communication that can contribute to individual resilience; then, I discuss the ways in which family systems cultivate a collective sense of resilience.

Whereas some perspectives view resilience as a trait-like characteristic that individuals are born with (e.g. Lucken & Gress, 2010), others describe it as a quality or skill that can be cultivated through practice and experience (Buzzanell, 2010). Two theoretical perspectives highlight dimensions of parental communication that are influential for developing emotional and behavioral responses in children that facilitate resilience. First, Gottman's (2001) emotion regulation theory focuses on features of parental communication that shape children's ability to effectively recognize and respond to their emotional experiences, which can be important for helping children navigate events marked by negative affect. Whereas parents' emotion coaching communication demonstrates acceptance of emotions and models appropriate strategies for managing emotional expression, parents' emotion dismissing communication is critical or dismissive of affective displays. The way that parents express their own emotion and respond to children's affective expressions establishes a model for effectively managing emotions in response to adversity, which can help bolster resilience.

Second, Baumrind's (1991) dimensions of parental communication highlight responsiveness and control as two features of parental communication that are instrumental in shaping children's emotional and behavioral responses to interpersonal events. Parental responsiveness is supportive and attentive to children's needs, while parental control involves communication behaviors that try to regulate or discipline children's emotions and actions.

Research applying Baumrind's typology to examine adolescent markers of resilience in response to parental communication suggests that parental responsiveness is associated with increased emotion regulation among adolescent children, whereas parental control is associated with decreased emotion regulation and increased behavioral impulsivity (Haverfield & Theiss, 2017). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that parental communication that is supportive, instructive, and responsive helps children develop the skills necessary to confront and cope with challenging circumstances, whereas parental communication that is controlling or dismissive can encourage children to be reactive, volatile, or impulsive in the face of adversity (e.g. Bonanno, 2004; Hillaker, Brophy-Herb, Villarruel, & Haas, 2008). Thus, the ways that parents communicate with their children can cultivate personal characteristics that are more or less flexible, adaptive, and resilient.

Beyond the development of individual resilience, families can also demonstrate resilience as an interdependent system. Walsh's (2003) family resilience framework identifies specific family processes and structures that buffer stress and dysfunction, and bolster healing and growth following a family crisis. First, resilient families tend to embrace belief systems that look for meaning in adversity, adopt a positive outlook, and integrate spirituality or transcendence. Next, resilient families tend to have organizational structures that encourage flexibility and adaptability, foster connectedness, and easily mobilize social and economic resources within the family. Finally, resilient families enact communication processes marked by clarity, open exchange of emotion, and collaborative problem-solving. Taken together, these protective factors contribute to family systems that show strength in the face of hardship.

One way that families establish their resilience is by communicatively constructing an identity and family history that celebrates strength and adaptability. From this point of view, difficult experiences and traumatic events create opportunities for families to reinvent themselves, create a new normal, revise their identity, and establish new connections (Buzzanell, 2010; Walsh, 2003). At the center of the social construction of family identity is narrative sensemaking (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015). Family stories or narratives reflect family members' understanding of adversity, assignment of blame, and perceptions of control. Through communicated narrative sensemaking, family members create a shared view of adverse events that allow them to organize, process, and make sense of shared experiences. Through the process of narrative sensemaking, families communicate in ways that emphasize their flexibility, establish rituals for behavior, embrace a positive family identity, and cope with adversity in more constructive and functional ways (Koenig Kellas, 2015). As families engage in joint storytelling about shared problems, they are confronted with an opportunity, as well as constraints. On the one hand, constructing a shared narrative about difficult family circumstances enables family members to hear and learn about one another's perspective and experience. On the other hand, the complexity of developing a shared narrative about family events may leave some family members feeling that their perspective is invalidated, disconfirmed, or excluded (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2005, 2006). Families are most likely to establish a shared understanding of stressful family experiences when their joint storytelling behaviors include interpersonal engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and narrative coherence (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). Thus, family systems are more resilient to experiences of trauma and crisis when they effectively construct shared narratives to make sense of challenging circumstances.

Another way that families collectively cultivate resilience is through communal coping. Families enact communal coping by pooling the resources of individual family members to better respond to adversity (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). Families that engage in communal coping assume co-ownership of stressors and difficult circumstances, as well as shared responsibility to take action to address the situation. The theoretical model of communal coping (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006) considers the ways in which individuals' coping behaviors are interdependent and can influence each other in positive and negative ways. The theory proposes that individuals and systems are more resilient when they communicate about stress and uncertainty as something they can resolve together. This sentiment can be expressed through direct verbal messages or through indirect action, such as joint problem-solving or shared involvement in resolution. Expressing collective ownership of a stressful situation and shared responsibility for finding resolution increases people's efficacy to cope with undesirable circumstances. In addition, communal coping can mitigate negative outcomes and enhance personal well-being. For example, communal coping between sisters from families with risk factors for breast and ovarian cancer is associated with decreased anxiety and somatization (Koehly et al., 2008). In families coping with the aftermath of divorce, shared family time and participation in joint activities are important for coping with stress and rebuilding a sense of family in the face of changing family structures (Huthinson et al., 2007). These findings illustrate that communal coping can be a vital tool for helping families demonstrate resilience in response to stress, uncertainty, and hardship.

In conclusion, family communication and resilience are deeply interwoven. At the individual level, parental communication plays an important role in socializing children to be emotionally and behaviorally adaptive. Through responsive parenting and effective emotion coaching, parents can help children develop skills and efficacy for coping with stressful circumstances. Family systems can also communicate in ways that foster resilience for the family unit as a whole. Through narrative sensemaking and communal coping, family members construct a shared vision of difficult events and experiences and take collective responsibility for managing hardships. Thus, family structures and communication processes are vital for cultivating individuals and systems that can successfully adapt in the face of adversity.

Disclosure statement

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