RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

What is resilience?

Resilience has become a popular word to use when talking about rangatahi and the challenges they can face making it safely to adulthood and being able to achieve their goals. It can be confusing, because it gets used in different ways:

An individual view

Sometimes resilience is used to mean whether or not a rangatahi can 'bounce back' from a stressful situation. This can be used in a judgemental way to suggest there is something wrong with them when they don't seem to do this. This view sees resilience as a characteristic that rangatahi may may be born with, or alternatively that they have not 'learned how to cope'.

Neither of these ways of thinking about resilience are very helpful if our goal is to support rangatahi to create positive change:

- If it is something rangatahi are born with, what can be done to help?
- What do we do if the way they have learned to 'cope' helps protect them from bigger risks even though these strategies are not socially acceptable?

So, an individual view of resilience in rangatahi can leave kaimahi feeling there is little they and other adults can do to support rangatahi to make big changes, when they are facing a lot of really difficult challenges they cannot easily control.

An ecological view

Another way of thinking about resilience is that it is a combination of the individual strategies rangatahi use to cope, based on their past experiences, and the supports (people and other resources) around them that help them grow and change. This way of thinking about it has some benefits for kaimahi:

- They can see the way rangatahi cope as coming at least in part from the challenges and circumstances around them – so rather than problem behaviour, their coping is seen as the best way they have at the moment to manage their challenging lives.
- Sometimes this is called 'hidden resilience' – the best way of coping given their circumstances. This creates opportunities to address the causes of behaviours, rather than just focusing on the behaviours in isolation (see Context).
- It encourages kaimahi to look for people in the networks of each rangatahi who might be able to support them.

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It reminds us that resilience is able to change – as a result of our mahi we can assist rangatahi to build their resilience by identifying people, organisations and systems that have resources they can draw on to create change and by not blaming them when their behaviour causes problems for themselves and the people around them (see Recognition and shame and Resistance). By doing these things, they can become more and more resilient – that is more and more able to cope with the challenges their lives bring to them.

Here is a definition of resilience that uses the ecological view:

> Resilience is the capacity to navigate to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity to individually and collectively negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2011).

Some important things to think about in this definition:

We use resilience when we are thinking of exposure to significant adversity. This is what separates resilience from just thinking only about strengths people show in coping with everyday situations. It highlights the importance of the individual in the context of their wider life - the social ecology around that person (see Context, Structural thinking, Māori centred approaches).

It also reminds us that resilience is not something people are born with (and therefore not able to change), and also it changes over time. Importantly, this means that kaimahi can help rangatahi to build their resilience so they are better able to cope well with challenges. To do this kaimahi need to be able to support rangatahi to get access to resources, systems and positive individuals in their own lives that together support their coping. These resources and individuals need to be relevant and meaningful to each rangatahi (see Rangatahi are the centre of our mahi).

How is resilience useful for my mahi?

The ecological definition of resilience is useful to us because it means that resilience has many different dimensions that vary depending on the rangatahi and their context. So, time, age, gender, cultural background, other life circumstances and biological factors all influence resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Masten, 2011; Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2012; Ungar, 2008). Also, different factors and combinations of factors appear to come into play at different times and in response to the presence of different combinations of risks (Ungar, 2011).

This is why resilience is so exciting in work with rangatahi because it is something that kaimahi can really do something about – they can grow and develop it through their mahi with rangatahi.

In the research that led to PARTH the most significant factor that influenced how much positive change rangatahi were able to achieve and sustain, was their level of resilience as measured by the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM, Sanders, Munford & Liebenberg, 2017).

This included connection with whānau, supportive peers, other positive adults, community and cultural resources and internal strengths. When combined with a positive relationship with their kaimahi, rangatahi achieved the very best long-term outcomes. This shows us that the relationships around rangatahi make a huge difference to their outcomes.

This way of thinking about resilience sees it as a protective process (not an individual characteristic) that we can think of as scaffolding around rangatahi that enables them to increase their capacity to do well despite the risks they face (Liebenberg et al., 2012).

So, we will achieve better outcomes when we focus not only on risk reduction but also on deliberately building resilience processes and resources around rangatahi (Ahern, Kiehl, Sole, & Byers, 2006).

When we think about resilience, we can see why it is so important to help rangatahi build relationships with other supportive adults during our mahi. These people become important relational resources that can help them to manage challenges after our time with them has finished.

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HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

The example below identifies how a kaimahi carefully supported a rangatahi to build resilience resources as they transitioned from services.

Sam had a long relationship with her youth agency and she regularly accessed clinical services. Sam came to the agency at 16 and had seen a youth coach for four years. She had a history of mental health concerns, which meant that education had been difficult for her. Sam's mental illness also meant that she needed a lot of support and attention from services.

After working with her youth coach for three years, Sam was going to 'age out' of youth services. Her youth coach knew she would need a long time to transition Sam out of the service, so began this work a year in advance. The youth coach knew that because Sam was vulnerable the transition needed to be carefully managed.

The transition work involved goal setting, and connecting Sam to positive activities and support, in order to support Sam into independence. A lot of time was spent supporting Sam to be able to get into education. Sam had been on and off in education due to her mental health. The youth coach supported Sam to meet with polytech pastoral care staff and create a plan for her education going forward.

The youth coach also introduced Sam to the gym and she loved it. She connected with a personal trainer and found a new community of people she felt comfortable with and enjoyed going to the gym. This was another step in Sam finding independence.

As Sam's 'age out' date loomed closer the youth coach began talking to Sam about other services she would like involved in her life. Sam felt she still needed support with her education and work prospects. Together, they looked into adult services and decided which one would fit best.

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The youth coach supported Sam at initial appointments with the adult service that Sam chose, even hosting the first one in her office where Sam felt most comfortable. Sam began attending these appointments on her own.

Once the youth coach felt that Sam was being supported by the appropriate adult service, she began the farewell process with Sam. They had a final coffee together and Sam understood clearly that she had transitioned out of youth services.

Rather than Sam being upset or worried, the process had meant that Sam had felt affirmed and assured. The decisions had been made by her, and she felt confident going on to the next service.

Sam still uses the clinical services of the youth service and still says hello to the youth coach when they cross paths. Sam's transition to independence from youth services was carefully planned meaning that when she needs to 'age out' of the clinical services she will be better able to cope.

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Here are some places to look for more information

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