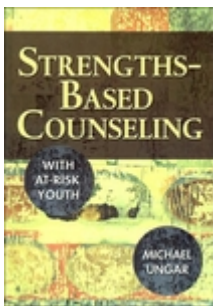


Building Resiliency With At-Risk Youth

A review of



Strengths-Based Counseling With At-Risk Youth

by Michael Ungar

Thousand Oaks, CA : Corwin Press, 2006. 129 pp. ISBN 1-4129-2819-2

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Reviewed by

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A hot topic in the literature on youth is resiliency. Michael Ungar's *Strengths-Based Counseling With At-Risk Youth* is an approach to working with at-risk youth. He starts off the text with a personal example of a bully, Geoffrey, from his youth. Ungar notes that both Geoffrey and he were trying to survive and thrive, and he defines resilience as “people's capacity to overcome great adversity in their lives” (p. 3). Furthermore, he breaks down resilient children into two groups: those who beat the odds and those who more than beat the odds. “Resilience is more than just a set of behaviors or personality traits that we associate with health and successful growth. It is also the ability of children to convince their caregivers that they *are* healthy” (p. 49).

This is a very simple definition. According to Siebert (2006), of the Resiliency Center, *resilience* is defined as being

able to recover quickly from misfortune; able to return to original form after being bent, compressed, or stretched out of shape. A human ability to recover quickly from disruptive

change, illness, or misfortune without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional ways.

(3)

Resilience is the human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by adverse experiences. However, defining resilience is a continuing problem in the literature (Kaufman, Cook, Arny, Jones & Pittinsky, 1994).

Ungar develops some basic metaphors to use in labeling at-risk youth. He states that children use the following three survival strategies to create powerful identities (p. 4):

- Pandas stick with one identity no matter where they are or whom they are with.
- Chameleons blend in to survive.
- Leopards insist that others look at them in ways they control.

“Regardless of what the youth are doing, these three approaches to life help the young people cope with the challenges of nurturing and maintaining a powerful way of being themselves when they're with others” (pp. 4–5). Ungar talks about the negative labels used for youths, such as *delinquent*, *disordered*, *deviant*, and *dangerous*, yet he creates the labels *panda*, *chameleon*, and *leopard* to categorize youth. Pandas survive by reinforcing one powerful self-definition in all parts of their lives, are good at accommodating to new situations, ignore demands on them to change, and depend on others who will keep their identity strong. Chameleons fit in and adapt their identities according to whom they choose to spend time with, choose relationships that allow them to share the power and prestige of others, and pride themselves on their skills in creating new identities as they seek out new people in their lives. Leopards convince others to accept them as they want to be known; challenge people to think differently about gender roles, age roles, and other ways in which youths are stereotyped; and force others to redefine what it means to be a healthy child.

Ungar makes a good point of suggesting that problem behaviors be replaced with a positive substitute. “As a first principle for helping youth find healthier identities, one we associate with resilience, whether as pandas, chameleons, or leopards, adolescents must find substitutes for their problem behavior” (p. 13). He stresses that change must emanate from youths and not be required of them if they are to incorporate it into their self-identity.

Throughout the chapters on pandas, chameleons, and leopards, Ungar includes case vignettes. The cases are helpful in outlining the types of at-risk youths; however, more time could have been spent analyzing these cases and suggesting ways of working with these youths. At times, how the cases fit the metaphors of panda, chameleon, and leopard is not clear-cut.

Ungar offers six strategies for teachers and counselors to help at-risk youths develop healthy identities (pp. 36–37).

1. Hear their truth—and help them listen for others.
2. Help youth look critically at their behavior.
3. Create opportunities that fit with what youth say they need.
4. Speak in ways youth will hear and respect.
5. Find the different that counts the most.
6. Substitute rather than suppress behaviors.

The first five helping strategies are the conventional paths to resilience, according to Ungar, whereas the sixth truly focuses on helping at-risk youth.

Because the book opens with an account of a bully, Ungar devotes a chapter to bullying behavior across the three metaphorical types of at-risk youths.

The bully does what the bully does because it helps the bully survive... . When we understand what the bully likes about being a bully, we are more likely to find other ways bullies can be bullylike in ways that are socially desirable. (p. 91)

Ungar ends the chapter with some helpful suggestions for creating substitutions for bullies.

The last section of the book is devoted to the Resilient Youth Strengths Inventory. This assessment asks caregivers about the resilience of the youth in their care. The assessment views individual characteristics, relationships, community involvement, and cultural factors. Ungar devotes time to translating the assessment's results.

Overall, this book was an easy read with very plain language. It seemed simplistic at times and had a commonsense approach to working with teens. It would have been helpful had it provided a more detailed definition of resiliency, the basis of the book. In addition, more time could have been spent on the cases to fully engage the reader in critical thinking and problem-solving skills. If you are new to the topic of resiliency, this is a good place to start; however, the book will be too basic for readers who are more proficient in their knowledge of resiliency and asset-building skills.

References

- Kaufman, J., Cook, A., Arny, L., Jones, B., & Pittinsky, T. (1994). Problems defining resilience: Illustrations from the study of maltreated children. *Development and Psychopathology*, 6, 215–247.
- Siebert, A. (2006). *Definitions of resiliency*. Portland, OR: Resiliency Center. Retrieved May 23, 2006, from <http://www.resiliencycenter.com/definitions.shtml>
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