

Resilient families better able to cope with crisis

We know two families who are dealing with a serious illness of one of their family members. One family appears to coping well, while the other seems to be in a tailspin. Are there certain strategies a family can take to help them get through such a situation?

What you're describing is sometimes called family resilience. Researchers explain the term as the ability of some families to function well when facing some type of stress, and perhaps become even stronger through the process.

The type of stress involved can be almost anything, from an illness such as what you're describing, to the onset of financial trouble, to any type of major change including marriage, divorce, moving, changes related to work or many other types of circumstances. The exact same event can happen to different families, and their reactions could very likely be completely different.

Research suggests that different reactions to such stressors are the result of the resources families had available to them before the crisis struck, and whether a family is cohesive and generally has a positive outlook. But most families generally go through a period of "disorganization" immediately after a stressful event. More resilient families bounce back more quickly, and some grow even stronger.

One of the leading authorities on family resilience, Froma Walsh of the Chicago Center for Family Health, categorizes the keys to



family resilience in three areas: family belief systems, family organization and resources, and family communication. A fact sheet from University of Wisconsin-Extension, "Keys to Resilience: Transformation through Adversity," offers a summary of these aspects of resilient families online at fyi.uwex.edu/familyresiliency/. Among the nine practices Walsh has identified in resilient families are:

- **Make meaning out of adversity and challenge.** Resilient families find ways to share the challenge; individual members don't try to "go it alone."

- **Value transcendence and spirituality.** Many families find strength and comfort through traditional religious channels or through connections with music, art or nature.

- **Be flexible.** Families who can adjust members' roles and responsibilities if needed during a crisis often have an advantage.

- **Make use of resources.** Resilient families have a network of people and organizations they can rely on to assist with practical and moral support, and recognize when they need to ask for a helping hand.

- **Solve problems collaboratively.** Resilient families work together to identify problems and determine how to move forward. Doing so can actually help families practice skills that can help them prepare for future challenges.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to *Family Fundamentals*, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by James Bates, assistant professor and field specialist in Family Wellness for Ohio State University Extension.

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