

CONSOLATION AND HOPE IN A TIME OF CRISIS:
BRINGING CHAPLAINS TOGETHER TO CULTIVATE
HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SPIRITUAL
RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-RELATED
LOSSES FOR YEAR 7 PUPILS



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NURTURING SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE IN YEAR 7
STUDENTS DURING THEIR INDUCTION YEAR

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INTRODUCTION

The working understanding of spiritual resilience for the Chaplains: Loss and spiritual resilience project is underpinned by the thinking of Masten (2014), who states that an individual's resilience is *'embedded in relationships and social systems.'*

In the context of this study, spiritual resilience refers to helping students nurture their sense of self and purpose while encountering adversity. Spiritual resilience is rooted in connections, in meaningful relationships with other nurturing and competent adults rooted in spirituality, faith, and hope.

Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems.

(Gever Tulley, 2020)

Recognising resilience involves two key strands of identification. Firstly, the individual's response to adversity and secondly, their ability to recover (Masten, 2014).

The word 'resilience' originates from the Latin word 'resilire' which literally translates to 'spring back'.

(Dutta et al, 2017)

The book of Acts is largely a case study in resilience. The early apostles experienced the seizing and execution of their leader, followed by exile, arrests, beatings, and further executions. Paul especially exuded resilience. He experienced repeated traumas, any one of which might have derailed him.

(Nolty et al, 2021)

WHAT WE KNOW

- If resilience is not communicated clearly and carefully it can put undue pressure on individuals. Communicating resilience as a character trait that one either possesses or does not possess, can inadvertently leave someone believing if they show resilience, they are strong and if they do not, they are weak. Resilience is fostered from a trusted relational context (Sunderland, 2021).
- Demonstrating resilience does not necessarily require extraordinary responses to life's challenges. Simply living a life that recognises the need to face and learn from adverse conditions demonstrates a sense of resilience (Vitale, 2015).
- Connecting with an individual's innate spirituality is key to nurturing a resilient outlook. Research has shown that spirituality is a conduit for meaning making and provides comfort, hope and support through times of tribulation and uncertainty (Ryan, 1998).
- Although spirituality need not be expressed through religious belief, for some young people their spiritual core is expressed through their faith in God. Therefore, providing opportunities for students to engage with the worshipping community and encounter the power of the Gospel is crucial for fostering spiritual resilience.

What do we mean by Spiritual Flourishing?

A variety of terminology has been employed regarding the spiritual dimension life, some of which is a moving away from the terminology of faith formation employed in religious settings.

NICER's understanding of spiritual flourishing draws on Biblical and church traditions rooting spiritual flourishing in the physical and spiritual connections between the human, nature, and God. Spiritual flourishing is linked to the Hebrew concept of Shalom and denotes a right relationship with God, with others, and with God's good creation. It is about living life to the full (John 10:10).

To express Christian spirituality is to live in a state of loving awareness of God, the world around you and (crucially) with yourself.

<https://exeter.anglican.org/schools/christian-ethos-siams/spirituality/>

- If children and adolescents connect with their spiritual core, they are far more likely to face difficulties with resilience. (Miller, 2015)
- Adolescence tends to trigger a surge of spiritual awareness that engenders a thirst for discovery and meaning (Good et al., 2008).
- Neglecting a child's spirituality can be harmful and result in 'creating a brittle sense of self and a lack of resiliency.' (Miller, 2015)

If you want someone that persists and has grit and determination, build the spiritual core.

(Miller quoted in Borgeson, 2020).

WHAT ARE THE MARKERS AND INDICATORS OF SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE?

The actual markers and indicators of spiritual resilience can be revealed by connecting with and listening with the heart to students. Give young people the time and space to share their concerns and have their voices heard. Coles stresses the importance of actively listening, and of resisting the urge to overlay one's own interpretation on the experiences children describe, (Cited in Hyde, 2008).

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

(Phil: 4:13)

The truth is that in all the hardships of the past year, children and young people have responded and led with character. They've developed patience and resilience like never before...

(++Stephen Cottrell, 2021)

Resilient Youth¹, an Australian program established to help young people build a resilient mind, outlines 3 key components as indicators for resilience: connected, protected, and respected.

- **Connected** – having the ability to connect to self and others through positive relationships, good social skills and being able to recognise self in this context.
- **Protected** – through an awareness of being valued by those around you and nurturing a healthy mindset that includes a good diet, positive sleeping patterns and the strength to avoid unhealthy substances.
- **Respected** – to respect self and feel respected by others through nurturing a positive awareness of self and purpose in life, underpinned by a deep sense of personal values that guide and steer their choices in life and motivates them to contribute to the lives of others.

Actions to increase resilience can be targeted at different levels – they can aim to increase achievements of pupils; to support them through transitions and encourage healthy behaviours; to promote better interpersonal relationships between people.

(Allen for IHE, 2014)

As well as having a sense of connection to self and others, having a connection to the natural world can awaken the spiritual core and engender a sense of resilience. Children's spirituality is about relational consciousness. Hay and Nye identified four categories: child-God, child-people, child-world, and child-self (Hay and Nye, 2006). These relationships are to be understood as Martin Buber's I-Thou relationships, characterised by a depth of encounter and engagement, rather than the more distant, disengaged I-It relationships (Hay, 1998, p.15).

Practical gardening can bring fresh insights and meaning to exploration of Christian spirituality... together, the seasons make up a complete year, and can illustrate different stages of journeying through our lives...Parallels in life can be drawn from every aspect of seasonal cultivation.

<https://gardeningtheheart.co.uk/aboutpg/parable-garden-design>

When we provide time and space for children to explore their connection with nature, we afford them "moments to wonder," room to explore their questions and nurture their own innate dispositions.

<https://growing-wonder.com>

¹ <https://resilientyouth.org/what-we-do>

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE AND YEAR 7 INDUCTION

In a school environment, spiritual resilience is nurtured by:

- positive relationships with nurturing adults rooted in spirituality
- strong bonds to an effective school community.
- faith, hope, and a sense of meaning in life.
- a commitment to spiritual values and practice in a community with positive standards, rituals, and relationships. (Masten, 2010)

Nurturing a sense of resilience is a whole-school responsibility that permeates the life of the community. It cannot be confined to any one part of the curriculum, nor to a specific time, nor is it solely the responsibility of the chaplain, Religious Education team, worship coordinator, or head teacher.

The process of transition and induction to a new school environment can be simultaneously exciting and challenging for students. Having a sense of belonging provides a crucial anchor and foundation for spiritual resilience.

Attachment relationships beyond the caregiver are sought and formed as young people grow up. Thus, providing opportunities for new students to connect with competent, caring adults can facilitate resilience in children and enable them to feel secure, freeing them to explore their new environment (Masten, 2014).

Forging trusted links with parents and guardians of young people can further cement the power of attachment relationships. *Preventive intervention research with families going through divorce and other kinds of adversity has demonstrated that helping and supporting parents has a protective effect on their children, with positive effects that can last for years after the intervention* (Masten, 2010).

Given the pervasive significance of attachment relationships, it is not surprising to find that positive school-based relationships – with teachers, friends, coaches, and mentors – are implicated in many studies of resilience.

(Masten, 2014)

Creating an environment where risks from bullying and intimidation are significantly reduced enable students to feel protected. Equally, restorative approaches involving all those affected can engender a sense of self-reflection and awareness.

There is the potential of restorative justice in schools: to foster coping, resilience, civic development and engagement, and other positive psychosocial and developmental outcomes for young people.

(Valez, 2021)

A school community that ensures students' basic needs also fosters a sense of spiritual resilience. If students are supported with healthy meals, the right classroom equipment, caring tutors, and trained professionals who can help mitigate *the effects of high-risk situations* (Masten, 2010), they are more likely to feel protected and valued.

Having positive role models is crucial in helping students flourish and gain a sense of purpose and meaning within their own lives. Connecting and learning from those around them can create a positive awareness and commitment to self.

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

(Pope Paul VI, 1975)

SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE AND VULNERABLE STUDENTS

The turbulent effect of the pandemic on people's lives will have tested resilience on many levels. A sense of vulnerability will have equally invaded lives as usual living conditions crumbled, and the various anchors of connection, safety and protection were uprooted. Not everyone has the same core reserves to draw upon when faced with adversity, and therefore their ability to respond with resilience is impaired.

Students are more likely to experience an increased frequency of adversity in life and are less likely to have a sense of hope and positivity about the future when they experience various levels of deprivation through exposure to poor housing conditions; relentless family difficulties and conflict; mental distress; poor educational and employment outcomes.

Inequalities in all of these areas are likely to reflect and contribute to inequalities in resilience, as the presence of damaging risk factors and the absence of protective factors increases vulnerability and reduces resilience. (Allen, 2014). Thus, any presence of determination and grit can be worn down by life's challenges and constant 'knock-backs'

It is essential for students who suffer adversity without the support of positive relationships and nurturing guidance beyond the school community, to have opportunities within school, to connect with a surrogate parental figure such as a member of staff, who can offer stability and safety (Taplin-Wilson, 2016).

Having just one emotionally available adult in the child's life, in an ongoing consistent relationship results in the child's toxic stress calming down to tolerable stress.

(Sunderland, 2021)

Recovering from challenging encounters like the pandemic

Generally stepping into circumstances that are new and unknown can raise anxiety as well as stress levels. For year 7 transitioning to a new school environment, raised anxiety is a normal reaction that allows them to risk assess their unfamiliar surroundings. When such anxiety and stress is experienced against the backdrop of COVID-19 disruption, it can raise their sense of anxiety to the edge of overwhelm.

The significance of Jesus calming the storm is pertinent to what's happening in our world today and is evidence of God's love for us.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our lives. We're flooded by numerous types of storms daily.

These storms are both internal and external. The intense surges of emotion within us are due to our humanity while the chaotic circumstances around us are beyond our control.

(Bernock, 2020)

Through trauma situations it has been found that connection or belief to a higher power, such as God can provide a source of comfort and strength during adversity. (Ryan 1998)

Respondents asserted that God/a higher power/divine energy of the universe has been the agent for survival and healing in their lives.

(Ryan 1998)

Don't be afraid and don't panic, for I, the LORD your God, am with you in all you do.

Joshua 1:9

Spirituality that is expressed through faith in God can offer those experiencing adversity a stronghold that sustains them and offers them hope.

The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.

Psalms 145:14.

The pandemic has confronted our usual routines. It has disrupted our core human needs for social connection, productivity, and systems of order. With so many of these needs affected simultaneously, it can mean our brain goes into crisis management and we live in the mode of hyper-alert. With our brain in this mode, we naturally shut down our analytical thinking brain, and our capacity to think rationally and clearly is diminished. (Middleton, 2021)

Living in this hyper – alert state can lead us to become pricklier in reaction to others, our tolerance levels are fragile, and our overall demeanour can be irritable. We can find it harder to manage the smaller challenges in life, let alone the major ones. (Middleton, 2021). Although this mental state is not specific to young children, being aware of this within a community can help us understand our possible reactions to others and theirs to us. It is also important to recognise that adolescents are more prone to operating in the crisis zone due to their maturing emotions (Middleton, 2021).

How do we reduce this sense of high anxiety?

1. Ensure that predictable routine is embedded into the school day and think carefully about suddenly introducing new changes during this time of recovery.
 2. Prioritise the need for rest and relaxation. Where can moments during the school day be handed over to moments of rest? A high- alert mind cannot concentrate, a healthy balance between productivity and rest may improve engagement in study.
 3. As well as moving forward with a positive outlook post lockdown, deal also with the frustrations of loss and the anxiety that remains. Find time to discuss and share these feelings.
 4. Find time to share positive and fun things in life.
- (Middleton, 2021).

Rest even though you are busy.

Six days you shall labour, but on the seventh day you shall rest, even during the ploughing season and harvest you must rest.

(Exodus 34:21)

REFLECTIONS

1. Does anything in the literature above resonate with your own thoughts on spiritual resilience?
2. What do you think are the markers and indicators of spiritual resilience in your context?
3. How do you see the connection between spiritual resilience and the nurturing of faith in your role as chaplain?
4. What role can chaplaincy play in nurturing spiritual resilience amongst year 7, and therefore help mitigate the sense of loss and anxiety some of them may have encountered because of COVID- 19 disruption?
5. How can Year 7s see spiritual resilience modelled within the school community? How are staff and other students modelling this?

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