



Fact sheet 6

Resilience, vulnerability and suicide prevention

There are many theories about how individuals develop and how they build their resilience, wellbeing and attitudes to life.

This fact sheet explains resilience and vulnerability and how they relate to suicide and suicide prevention in Australia.

What is resilience?

Everyone experiences stress and difficult circumstances during their life. Most people can handle these tough times and may even be able to make something good from a difficult situation. Resilience is the ability to bounce back after experiencing trauma or stress, to adapt to changing circumstances and respond positively to difficult situations.

It is the ability to learn and grow through the positive and the negative experiences of life, turning potentially traumatic experiences into constructive ones. Being resilient involves engaging with friends and family for support, and using coping strategies and problem-solving skills effectively to work through difficulties.

What is vulnerability?

On the other hand, people who have a tendency to respond negatively when faced with difficult or traumatic life events may become discouraged or defeated and be more vulnerable. Many factors contribute to vulnerability, and often they are the same factors that contribute to resilience. For instance, a family environment that is supportive and caring will enhance resilience, while lack of family support or exposure to abuse or trauma may make a person more vulnerable and less able to cope with potentially traumatic incidents. **Figure 1** illustrates the relationship between resilience and vulnerability factors.

FIGURE 1: The opposite concepts of vulnerability and resilience.

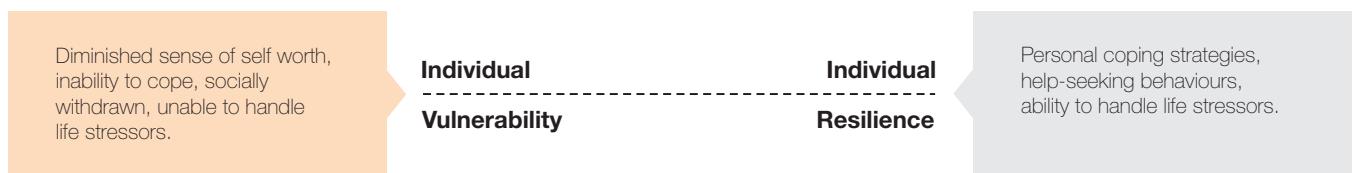


FIGURE 2: Factors that contribute to individual health and wellbeing.

Individual health and wellbeing	
Self-image	Sense of self includes: Self-esteem; secure identity; ability to cope; and mental health and wellbeing.
Behaviour	Social skills include: Life skills; communication; flexibility; and caring.
Spirit	Sense of purpose includes: Motivation; purpose in life; spirituality; beliefs; and meaning.

Individual health and wellbeing	
Heart	Emotional stability includes: Emotional skills; humour; and empathy.
Mind	Problem solving skills includes: Planning; problem solving; help-seeking; and critical and creative thinking.
Body	Physical health includes: Health; physical energy; and physical capacity.

(Adapted from Beautrais, 1998; Kumpfer, 1999; Maslow, 1943; Rudd, 2000)



The importance of individual health and wellbeing

From birth, everyone develops their sense of self and their unique ways of coping with life. **Figure 2** summarises the essential characteristics for health and wellbeing that strengthen the individual and prepare them for life's challenges. External factors and experiences such as family life and social interactions also influence a person's reaction to difficult circumstances. Accumulated experiences from the past (cultural, social, family), and anticipation of the future (expectations, hopes, dreams and fears) all affect the individual's ability to manage the range of events that can occur throughout life. These external factors can be summarised into four broad areas as illustrated in **Figure 3**.

FIGURE 3: The four main factors that influence a person's reaction to life events.

Individual health and wellbeing	Sense of self; social skills; sense of purpose; emotional stability; problem solving skills; and physical health.
Predisposing or individual factors	Genes, gender and gender identity; personality; ethnicity/culture; socio-economic background; and social/geographic inclusion or isolation.
Life history and experience	Family history and context; previous physical and mental health; exposure to trauma; past social and cultural experiences; and history of coping.
Social and community support	Support and understanding from family, friends, local doctor, local community, school; level of connectedness; safe and secure support environments; and availability of sensitive professionals/carers and mental health practitioners.

How to increase individual resilience

- Look after relationships. Family and close friends are usually willing to listen, provide support and often have helpful ideas or know where to go for help in all sorts of situations.
- Think well of yourself. Identify what you are good at, and what you need to learn, to help you face the future. Invest time and energy in developing new skills.
- Practice helpful ways of thinking. Challenge negative thoughts and look for alternative solutions to problems, to find optimistic ways of viewing any situation.
- Maintain health. Look after your physical health. Poor diet and lack of exercise may contribute to negative thinking.
- Develop a sense of connectedness. Get involved in enjoyable community activities such as social or sporting activities or volunteering; it will help to broaden social networks and counter any feelings of isolation.
- Don't tackle major problems alone. Ask for help and support when you need it, don't be afraid of expressing your emotions and offer assistance in turn to those around you.

How to build community resilience

- Build community cohesion. Communities that work together and work towards common goals have a greater sense of optimism and morale.
- Build stronger families. Community education programs can be helpful in improving skills in areas such as parenting, communication, relationships, money management, stress management and coping skills.
- Develop cultural competency. Communities that value their cultural diversity can work more strongly together when times are hard. Education and training in cultural competency for key community members helps to ensure that the right support is available to everyone when they need it.
- Build safe and healthy environments including lowering the threat of violence. Communities that are safe and secure are more likely to manage difficult circumstances positively.
- Encourage healthy lifestyles. Promote regular physical exercise in the community by providing education and awareness programs and access to bike or walking paths, parklands, and sport and other community facilities.

More information

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