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Strengths-Based Resilience

A Positive Psychology Program

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Strengths-Based Resilience: A Positive Psychology Program

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About the Authors

Tayyab Rashid, PhD, CPsych, is a licensed school and clinical psychologist and an associate faculty member at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC). Prior to joining UTSC, Dr. Rashid worked for 5 years on the Toronto District School Board as a school psychologist. His expertise includes strengths-based assessment and interventions, positive education, posttraumatic growth, and multicultural counseling. Dr. Rashid has worked with individuals experiencing severe trauma, including survivors of the 2004 Asian Tsunami, Syrian refugee families, families impacted by mass shootings, and journalists who have worked in high-conflict zones. Dr. Rashid's work has been published in academic journals and in textbooks of psychiatry and psychotherapy. His book *Positive Psychotherapy* (2018), coauthored with Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, has been translated into several languages to date. In recognition of his work, including the training of mental health professionals internationally, Dr. Rashid won the Outstanding Practitioner Award (2017) from the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) and the Chancellor's Award (2018) from the University of Toronto.

Jane Gillham, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist, educator, and researcher at Swarthmore College in the US. Dr. Gillham also conducted research at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center for many years. Dr. Gillham's research focuses on promoting resilience and well-being in youths, with a particular focus on how schools, families, and communities can promote participants' social and emotional development and help participants thrive. Dr. Gillham completed her BA in psychology at Princeton University, her PhD in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania (with Dr. Martin Seligman), and her internship in child clinical psychology at the Yale University Child Study Center. Dr. Gillham is cocreator of the Penn Resilience Program (PRP), a curriculum designed to teach adolescents cognitive-behavioral skills for handling everyday challenges and stressors. PRP has been evaluated in more than 20 randomized controlled studies completed across the world. Dr. Gillham is an author of several other well-being programs for youths, including the Girls Strengths and Resilience Program and a high school positive psychology curriculum. She has led several large program evaluation studies of these and other curricula designed to promote resilience, strengths, and well-being in youth. Dr. Gillham also serves as a scientific advisor to CorStone, a nonprofit organization devoted to promoting resilience and well-being in young people, especially those in poor and marginalized communities. Dr. Gillham's research has been published in top tier peer-reviewed journals. She serves as an associate editor for the *Journal of Positive Psychology* and is on the editorial board of several other academic journals.

Afroze Anjum, PsyD, CPsych, is a licensed school psychologist on the Toronto District School Board. Dr. Anjum's expertise includes strengths-based, school-based interventions that incorporate character strengths, resilience, mindfulness, and adaptive problem solving, to cope with challenges such as depression, anxiety, bullying, and lack of motivation in children. Dr. Anjum obtained her doctoral degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, and she completed her postdoctoral training with Dr. Jane Gillham at Swarthmore College and the University of Pennsylvania where she worked as a researcher and training facilitator for the Penn Resilience Program and the Positive Psychology for Youth Project, a positive psychology curriculum study with high school participants. Dr. Anjum has taught and trained numerous professionals in positive interventions. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals and in edited volumes. Dr. Anjum is currently part of the Toronto District School Board's Wellbeing Committee in the wake of COVID-19.

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Dedication

In loving memory of our mentor, Robert Ostermann, who saw not what was behind or before us, but what was within us.

T.R. & A.A.

In loving memory of Chris Peterson, who celebrated and nurtured the best in others, and whose work on character strengths inspired this program.

J.G.

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- Notes on Illustrations

1 Resilience

Resilience is a popular concept, and there are numerous programs to foster it (Calitz, 2018; Joyce et al., 2018; McAvera, 2018). In this chapter, we discuss why we believe another program on resilience is needed. To make our case, we first discuss the rising rates of psychopathology, in the context of societal changes. Next, we describe various definitions and descriptions of resilience. We end the chapter with 10 key considerations that we think are important for resilience interventions.

Rising Rates of Psychopathology and Societal Changes

Multiple lines of research indicate that psychopathology among children and adolescents has been increasing steadily. The following are some recent findings:

- The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUSH; Twenge et al., 2019; Weinberger et al., 2018) found that more American adolescents and young adults in the late 2010s (vs. the mid-2000s) had experienced severe psychological distress and depression ($N = 611,880$). They also experienced suicidal ideation more, made more suicide attempts, and also had a higher suicide completion rate. These trends were found to be weak or nonexistent among adults aged 26 years and older, suggesting a generational shift in mood disorders and suicide-related outcomes, rather than an overall increase across all ages.
- Cross-sectional surveys of almost half a million students in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades show that depressive symptoms are increasing among the young, especially among girls (Keyes et al., 2019). Likewise, rates of psychopathology among college and university students have been increasing steadily. The National College Health Survey (2018), one of the largest of its kind, reported that nearly 40% of US college students ($N = 30,696$) had felt so depressed during the past 12 months that they could not function. Almost 2% attempted suicide, and 7.8% engaged in self-harming behaviour. The World Health Organization Mental Health survey, completed by 1,572 students (aged 18–22 years) from 21 countries, found that 20.3% of students met standardized criteria for a psychiatric disorder (Auerbach et al., 2016).
- Polanczyk and his colleagues (2015), in their meta-analysis of 41 studies from 27 countries, representing every region, found a pooled prevalence rate of 13.4% among children and adolescents (ages 6 through 17 years).
- The Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) is one of the longest ongoing school surveys of adolescents in Canada, and also one of the longest in the world. The 2018 results (Boak et al., 2018), based on a self-report of 11,435 grade 7–12 students, suggested that 39% of students indicated having experienced moderate to severe psychological distress in the past month.

Psychopathology among adolescents needs to be understood within the context of the developmental challenges adolescents typically face, especially their search for identity (Erikson, 1968). This process includes recalibration of relationships with parents, peers, and, perhaps



**Mindfulness
& Relaxation**

5 Mindfulness and Relaxation

Learning Outcomes for Mindfulness and Relaxation

By starting and ending each session with one of the six mindfulness and relaxation exercises, participants will

- Increase their awareness of character strengths, through specific mindfulness and gratitude exercises
- Increase awareness of their feelings, thoughts, and reactions
- Become more attentive to strengths such as self-regulation, savoring, and personal intelligence, as facilitators of mindfulness and relaxation processes
- Incorporate relaxation and mindfulness techniques in their daily life

Opening Module Relaxation & Mindfulness

Relaxation & Mindfulness: Start the module with a relaxation or mindfulness practice.

Gratitude Journal: Invite the participants to share a few good events that have occurred since the last session.

Core Concepts of Mindfulness

The themes here are also presented in the Core Concepts section of the Workbook (p. 5):

- Mindfulness is a process of regulating attention to explore that quality of one's experiences from the perspective of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance (Baer et al., 2006). Mindfulness has been captured through five facets: describing, observing, acting with awareness, nonjudging, and nonreacting (Baer et al., 2006).
- Mindfulness and positive psychology share a common goal – cultivating optimal human functioning (Baer & Lykinns, 2010), although, both approach this goal in different ways. In mindfulness, the approach is sitting quietly, with closed eyes or fixed gaze; directing one's attention to the present moment; being aware of sensations, emotions, and thoughts and how one is attached to them. The goal is to develop an inner capacity to enhance nonjudgmental and reactivity to these attachments. Positive psychology interventions, on the other hand, involve structured behavioral exercises, such as translating strengths into concrete actions, writing gratitude letters, and undertaking meaningful altruistic actions for others.
- Mindfulness increases our awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and reactions to experiences. Some specific events, experiences, and interactions stay in our heads. Whenever we think of them, emotions spring up and leave us feeling sad, happy, angry, or unsure. Some-

Reflection and Discussion

The first time you lead the group through this activity, invite group members to reflect on and share their experiences and to complete this Reflection and Discussion section in their Workbook (p. 20). Some questions you might ask include:

The LKM aims to carefully harness your attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions toward being kind. Were you able to experience this kindness during the practice? If so, what helped? If you struggled, what were the barriers?

If you could not, or had difficulty, visualizing a specific person, what made it difficult?

How deeply were you able to feel kindness and compassion for others during the practice? Did it change your mood after the practice?

Tips for Practitioners

It is important to consider culturally relevant adaptations or any refinements that might increase their effectiveness.

Negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or sadness keep us stuck in healthy states, and stick with us, negatively impacting our emotional well-being. Nonjudgmental mindfulness offers us a relatively simple way to observe these negative emotions and try to get unstuck. However, negative emotions provide us with a signal regarding our inner emotional lives. At times, anger, especially when someone is being treated unfairly, can be a justified emotion. Loss of a relationship, an object of significance, or status can make one sad. Fear of the unknown can make one anxious. There are cultural ways to express emotions. Mindfulness should not be used to replace those cultural approaches.

Patterns of responding, including judgment, evaluation, and appraisal, are culturally informed. Mindfulness can be a process of understanding cultural nuances. For example, individuals raised in a highly interdependent culture or families may blame themselves, while others with similar cultural backgrounds but different power hierarchies (based on gender, age, sib line, or financial status) may evade those responsibilities altogether.

Most mindfulness practices encourage participants to observe their emotions and thoughts and to reflect upon their actions. This reflection can motivate one to change typical patterns of responding, potentially causing changes and even disruptions to the status quo. Be mindful that it might be difficult for some participants to make drastic changes.

Relaxation and mindfulness are also about regulation of attention. They are about paying close attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. However, if someone has underlying attentional deficit challenges, they may find it hard to engage in relaxation and mindfulness practices. Offer alternatives such as movement-based practices, practices divided into smaller chunks, or practices supplemented by additional props (e.g., music, artifacts, or customized equipment). That can help individuals to experience benefits of relaxation and mindfulness, according to their abilities.

Mindfulness allows one to observe emotions, thoughts, and actions nonjudgmentally. Nonetheless, our perceptions are shaped by our culture and by socioeconomic factors. Therefore, it