

RESILIENCE AND EMOTION REGULATION

By Rebecca Stanwyck, LCSW - August 2015

As many of my clients know, I've never been too keen on giving people a diagnosis using the official manual of the American Psychiatric Association, the DSM. People often feel stigmatized by their diagnoses, and although it may be a relief to have a name for the particular condition or set of symptoms that plagues you, they are not scientifically validated in the same way that most medical diagnoses are. (The recent publication of the DSM-5, the latest version of the manual, generated a great deal of controversy over the new diagnoses the APA committee voted to include, vs. those not included, leading many professionals to publicly criticize the political nature of the process.)

Because mind and body are not separate entities, I prefer to think of mental health as a form of physical health referred to as "well-being," and define mental illness primarily as the absence of well-being. I view counseling and psychotherapy as a process of guiding people toward well-being, or recovering "the sanity we were born with," to borrow a phrase from Buddhist philosophy.

I've come to conceptualize nearly all of the mental health issues and conditions I see in my office as a function of two variables, **resilience** and **emotion regulation**. Basically, it seems to come down to **this simple formula: the more resilient you are, and the better able to regulate your emotions, the healthier you'll be** - mentally, emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically.

Resilience is defined as the "*ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity*" (Wikipedia) or "*the ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens*" (Merriam-Webster). In other words, it's not what happens to us in childhood or later on that determines our well-being, it's how well we bounce back when life knocks us down. Some of the psychological factors that contribute to resilience include a positive attitude, an optimistic outlook, the ability to regulate emotions, and the ability to see failure as a form of helpful feedback (Psychology Today).

The ability to regulate emotions is a function of **reactivity**. While reactivity in general refers to the responsiveness of an organism to a stimulus, **emotional reactivity** is described as an exaggerated response to the emotional expressions or behaviors of others. This over-reaction or hyper-reactivity is common in descriptions of many DSM disorders, including bipolar, panic disorder, PTSD, and "borderline personality disorder" (AKA "emotion regulation disorder"), though anyone can over-react when under severe stress or when dealing with major conflict in relationships. Attachment Theory says that the ability to regulate emotions is primarily learned and developed through infant-caregiver bonds, but neuroscientists have also identified biological factors, including genetics, structural and/or functional differences in the brain, and brain damage.

We're less likely to think of emotional under-reaction as a problem, yet it also can be, for example when people appear numb, or indifferent to the expressed emotions of others, as in cases of severe depression. In fact, both over-reacting and under-reacting to others' emotions is one of the biggest issues in interpersonal relationships, and a common cause for couples to seek counseling.

Can people learn to be more resilient, and to better regulate their emotional reactivity? Absolutely! There are many evidence-based treatments, including neurofeedback and medications, but my favorites are cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and its variations: Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). To find out how any of these therapies could help you, contact me: