RESILIENCE IN NEWCOMER FAMILIES

ABSTRACT

People who work in helping roles with newcomers can avoid problems of dependency and ensure better outcomes by utilising a strengths-based approach. Awareness of client resilience traits enables both respectful helping and client morale. This paper explains a variety of typical resilience traits and their roles in the life of a newcomer family.

After Saddam Hussein's regime had bombed the Iraqi village several times, and each time the inhabitants had rebuilt their shattered homes and buried their dead, one family decided they had enough. Amad,1 a young teacher, took his wife and one child and walked to the Turkish border. He had heard that if they could get to a refugee camp in Turkey, they might be able to get to Canada or Australia some day and start a new life. He thought he could get a job teaching in the new country. At the border, they narrowly escaped being turned back by taking a different path, one they had discovered by talking with others. They ended up at the camp, where they stayed for about five years.

While at the camp, the family lived in a one-room concrete block structure. Amad began teaching the children who lived in the camp. They had a couple more children. They applied for permission to go to Canada and Australia. Eventually, they were granted permission to emigrate to Canada. Amad was excited and looked forward to becoming a teacher in Canada. They would have a nice house and he would enjoy a career there while they raised their children.

The family arrived in a city in Ontario and Amad tried to find work. They had to apply to social services for income. Unfortunately, he was involved in two automobile accidents. His wife developed a chronic health problem. They sought help at a local community health centre. Amad didn't understand what was happening to him. He was feeling so disappointed. His dreams seemed to be unachievable. Fortunately, help was available. It became apparent that the effects of the bombings, the long stress of escaping and living in the camps, and the car accidents, had left him with post-traumatic stress disorder. He was able to get therapy for his condition and succeeded in obtaining a disability pension. After several years, the family is doing better. Their English is good, the children are doing well at school, his wife is much healthier. Amad has developed friendships and interests, such as using computers. He volunteers in the community as a translator.

While Canada seems like a land of great promise to newcomers, the reality is that many face great challenges when they arrive. These challenges test their resilience. Often, such families depend on help from their new communities. How this help is given is crucial. There is a world of difference between help that builds on family strengths, and help that is patronising and belittling. Let us examine the kinds of challenges families face, and then explore how to build on their strengths and resilience factors.

The list of challenges for newcomer families is long. They feel such strangeness here. People do so many things differently; speech, clothing, transportation, cooking, politeness, pace of life, types of housing, and so on. Even families seem different, with many single-parent led households and nuclear, rather than extended, family structures. In many areas neighbours hardly know each other and certainly don't trust each other.

Newcomers sometimes have to live in public housing, with factors of crowding, family problems, gangs and stigma. Their finances are inadequate and jobs are marginal. To work in one's field of training is not easy; one has to learn adequate English and obtain Canadian certification and work experience. They experience discrimination, insults and harassment, especially about accents, ethnicity and skin colour. Agencies may give them contradictory information or expect too much of them. Stress and insecurity are frequently felt, but many come from cultures where these concepts are unknown. Traditional coping practices and resources are often either inadequate or absent. Children acclimatise more easily and challenge the parents with their "Canadian" behaviours and opinions. Contact with child welfare agencies creates great confusion and fear, as parents struggle to adapt to Canadian values and parenting styles.

Despite the challenges mentioned, newcomer families like Amad's somehow make the adjustment. It takes time, it takes help and support, and most of all it takes resilience. The concept of resilience is of great

DOMINIC BOYD

Dominic Boyd is a social worker in South-west Ontario. Originally from Australia, he grew up in Nova Scotia. His interests are broad, including counselling, group work and community development. Along with his social work degrees, he has two certificates in human relations.

use in helping families. There are two types of resilience we can consider. One is the more familiar "ability to bounce back", similar to the idea of a ball bouncing off a wall. This denotes a family that is able to take things in stride, utilizing their already-learned coping resources. The other type is known as "deep resilience" and means the ability of the family to stretch, to grow and learn, and to let go. Typically, the newcomer family is faced with the need to develop deep resilience.

Deep resilience comes from an awareness and acceptance that one has to make some deep changes. It involves asking several questions: "How is this situation challenging me to grow?" "What do I need to learn, in order to cope?" "What must I let go of that isn't working any more?" "What attitude will serve me best?" Making changes isn't easy. It may involve reconsidering some deeply-held values, habits or dreams. Let us now consider how Amad and his family showed resilience as they coped with their many challenges.

It is apparent that surviving bombing attacks in Iraq must have been terrifying, yet the villagers rebuilt three times. Most of us in Canada probably have no idea what that would be like. The inner strength, community spirit and overall defiance, the "we want to live" attitude, factors such as religion and nationalism and cultural pride, love of family and desire to see one's children safe, are among the resilience qualities that enable people to endure. Rather than giving up, Amad dreamed of a better life and was willing to take risks to find it. He knew he had skills he could take with him. Like many other families, they set off for the unknown. What faith that must have taken! Faith is a resilience trait.

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Years in a camp further tested Amad and his family. The cramped quarters, poor food, lack of sanitation, monotony, waiting and waiting for word about their future; all conspired to bring a person down. Somehow they managed to hold on, to believe in their dream, to hope, to get through each day. Amad looked after his family and also organised a small class so he could teach children in the camp. He was able to keep up his skills and make life more interesting, as well as know that he was helping others. He scrounged resources and made it happen. He kept up his self-advocacy toward obtaining permission to emigrate. Hope is a resilience trait.

Once in Canada, Amad was hopeful that he could start anew and be successful. Unfortunately, he received injury and emotional shock in some car accidents. He found that something was wrong with him, but couldn't make sense of it. He sought help. Willingness to ask for help is an essential resilience trait. It became apparent that the continuous stresses he had been through had created a cumulative impact. The accidents were the "straw that broke the camel's back."There are treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but they have to be tailored to suit the person. Early attempts at counselling discovered the source of the problem but left Amad feeling about the same. Once the PTSD diagnosis was made, he was able to apply for disability. The process was hard, since he was initially turned down, but he persisted and eventually was successful. He formed a good therapeutic relationship with a doctor who was instrumental in obtaining his disability pension, as well as finding a treatment method that helped somewhat. Persistence is a hallmark of resilience.

Amad formed a connection with a social worker, who was able to assist with a variety of needs. In particular, he found a computer for Amad, who quickly learned how to use it and utilize the Internet. Amad started connecting with a lot of people and also taught his children how to use the computer. He also learned to navigate the social service system, deal with housing, schools, transportation and other needs. Accepting help and learning new skills are essential resilience traits.

Another aspect of successful immigration is building and utilizing social capital. Simply put, social capital means knowing who to go to in order to get things done. As time went by, Amad increased his understanding of how systems worked and who were the key people he needed to talk with when he had a problem. He cultivated relationships, as did his wife, and learned to figure out what he needed, how to ask for it and who to go to for it. Building relationships is a resilience trait.

Amad is proud of his wife and children. They enjoy doing things together as a family and socialising with other families. They continue some traditions and have adopted some Canadian ones too. He has modified his dreams; realizing, like many other immigrants, that his children are more likely to achieve the successes he once dreamed of. Flexibility is a resilience trait: letting go of the unattainable allows one to move on.

Newcomers display and depend on many inner strengths besides those mentioned above. These include resourcefulness, spiritual beliefs, knowledge of health issues and practices, cultural pride, openness to new ideas, willingness to risk, love of nature, love of family. Often, when people look for help, the helpers can overlook these strengths and the newcomers themselves might not be aware of them. A strengths-based approach puts a lot of emphasis on identifying strengths, rather than focussing only on problems. It builds pride in the family system and its coping practices. This in turn reduces dependency and increases the likelihood of successful results.

In summary, awareness of resilience traits and willingness to build on them are essential parts of the helping process. Newcomer families possess many such traits, but may not be fully aware of them. By showing respect for family strengths, by letting people relate and understand their own stories, their hidden strengths can be brought into mindfulness and thus employed in handling current difficulties. Those who work in helping capacities with newcomers, do best by utilizing such empowering strategies.

Note

[1] Name changed for privacy.