



# CREATING RESILIENT EDUCATORS

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A Global Learning Communities Manual

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First Published 2001

Re-Edited 2002

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ISBN: 1-876153-36-9

Published simultaneously in Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America.

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# Contents

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Introduction – The Nature of Resilience</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Building Personal Resilience</b>	<b>12</b>
	Living Well	65
	Physical Wellness	68
	Energetic Wellness	91
	Emotional Wellness	98
	Spiritual Wellness	102
	Mental Wellness	108
	Social Wellness	114
	Intellectual Wellness	118
	Financial Wellness	129
	Vocational Wellness	138
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Building Professional Resilience</b>	<b>148</b>
	Personal and Professional Support Network	175
	Professional Leadership	182
	Aligned and Consistent Practice	191
	Clear Purpose/Goals	211
	Strategic Direction	225
	Societal Wellness	229
	Systemic Wellness	236
	Being Entrepreneurial	252
<b>Additional Reading</b>		<b>258</b>

# **Chapter 1:**

## **Introduction:**

### **The Nature of Resiliency**

As we enter the unknown futures and uncertain times of this new millennium, it is timely for us as educators, to reflect on current reality and to assess our own personal wellness and resiliency for facing the enormous challenges ahead. We live and work in times of great turbulence, relentless demands, paradoxes and complexity. Recent events have shown that not only our direct environment, but the entire world may change in an instant. Our capacity to constructively manage the inevitable disruptions and changes that we all face within such a context determines to a large degree our well being and good health.

Resiliency is the self-righting capacity to learn and grow and change when adversity, stressors, or disruptions occur in our lives. It is the ability to thrive, not just to survive an adversity or misfortune. None of us are protected from life's knocks and difficulties. We are all at different times vulnerable. It is how we face this vulnerability and what meaning we choose to make about the issue or situation that leads to resilience. The good news is that we all have this innate capacity. At the same time though resilience is not a fixed state. We are neither always resilient nor non-resilient. Our resilience at any one moment will be dependent on the number of stressors we face and the coping mechanisms and support available to us at that time. Promoting resiliency in ourselves, our colleagues and our students needs to be a part of all school curricula since the future is unpredictable. Undoubtedly we will meet multiple challenges that require the development of flexible coping strategies, adaptive, responsive personal skills, critical and creative problem-solving skills and optimism and purposeful thinking.

Continuous change may well be the only certainty we have in the future. What do we have to hold onto in this world of complexity, turbulence, discontinuous change and ongoing and permanent obsolescence? Very little it seems, and that in itself is a double edged sword. Those educators able to accept that our fundamental assumptions about education and the traditional model of schools, belong to a different era and no longer serve a rapidly changing, technological, information era, at least will be sympathetic to the need for flexibility and change. Hopefully they will want to participate in the process of rethinking and recreating an enabling, holistic education that will prepare young people to be life-long learners. These educators will see themselves as active learners. Nonetheless, it is difficult and anxiety-provoking to let go of familiar ways of thinking and doing, that may well have been effective in the past. It takes courage to be experimental, to open yourself to possibility, and to not always know!

Those educators whose entire professional identity has been defined by the way that they have always worked and taught (teaching content and imparting knowledge, rather than being a learning facilitator and coach) and who cannot yet see why the status quo will no longer do, will certainly experience great anxiety, stress and resistance to the inevitable chaos and change around them. 'Omnivore' teachers who attempt to do too much and run the risk of eventual burnout also face different challenges. Either way all educators are experiencing greater system demands with broader expectations from the community at large, an expanding curriculum, conflictual and competing interests and tensions with peers as schools require teachers to share responsibility and work together rather than alone in isolated classrooms. The pressures on educators today can seem enormous!

It does not auger well for education in the future, when many educators seem to be experiencing stress, intellectual fatigue, physical exhaustion, a sense of powerlessness and loss of morale.

This is the time when we require all of our individual and collective energies, creativity, intellectual capital, commitment and passions. For whatever the future may be, whether we

chose to let others design it or to invent it ourselves, we will need to be resilient and emotionally intelligent. Each one of us must find ways to light the flame within our hearts and minds, to enable the regeneration of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices essential for reconceptualising a more appropriate educational process for our young people for tomorrow's world.

Given that changes in the macro sphere of politics, economics and society have impacted dramatically on teacher work and teacher identities (Munt, 1999), and that serious intrusions of instrumental rationality

and government policies are limiting teacher self- agency, it is still possible for us to individually and collectively take effective action. It is actually an imperative, for if we are to help equip our young people with a strong sense of purpose, self efficacy, and resiliency, then we must model this in our own lives.

The starting point must be ourselves. We can choose to be generative and take responsibility for being an active agent in our own personal and professional wellness, or we can behave like victims and continue to strive to be adaptive to imposed changes and events in our lives. Within all of us is an innate desire to be creative and a wish to be designers of our own destinies. Activating that inner desire is one of our intentions in writing this manual. Another is that all those who care and work with young people will feel optimistic, hopeful and joyful about themselves and the future, in spite of life's inevitable knocks, adversities and challenges that confront all human beings. How can we help young people to be purposeful and hopeful about the future if we do not firstly believe in our own capacity to do this? How can we teach young people to develop resiliency in themselves if we are modelling something else?

We know through our own life experiences that within all of us is that innate capacity to bounce back from hardships and stressful events, and that the life spirit within is so amazing that those very adversities that we struggle with can actually be transformative and offer us insights and new understandings that may never have occurred otherwise. Such gifts are truly enlightening.

The lessons about resiliency that we all need to know are in within each one of us. Sharing personal stories helps us to get in touch with our own inner wisdom and helps us to connect with one another as we each journey thorough life. We came to write this manual partly because of our own life experiences and stories. Everyone has a story to tell. Please respect yours. These are some relevant pieces of ours.

Polly's story began nearly four years ago on the day before Christmas, when she was quite unexpectedly admitted to hospital with a massive pelvic tumour and a secondary one on the kidney. The diagnosis was grim. She was operated on two days after Christmas Day when a specialist team could be gathered over the holiday period, and the smaller tumour was removed — the larger one being inoperable.

Whilst in intensive care after the operation her elder son Jamie had the anguishing task of informing her that she had from 1 to 4 weeks to live. This was just two months after watching his father die from cancer. In Polly's own words at the time she expresses her reaction.

“Amazingly I was not in shock. This was my death sentence, yet the happenings in my mind were clear, calm and coherent to me. There was complete acceptance. I remember vividly hearing from deep within these words — *Now you can do this with fear or you can do this with love.* And my immediate and unquestionable response was *I CHOOSE LOVE !* From that moment on it was as if I had entered a special space, a sacred domain, a spiritual realm that allowed me to be an

observer/participant at the earthly level but to remain protected from the usual fears and anxieties of daily life. I knew absolutely that all I needed to focus on was love, kindness and acceptance. I felt no fear of dying. My primary concern was to do everything possible to properly prepare for this death experience and to ensure that my sons and my friends experienced a joyful and spiritual time and a deeply loving participation in the process. I wanted to give my four sons a gift — of knowing and accepting death as a natural and beautiful thing that need not be feared.”

Instead of dying however Polly has through the amazing universal power of love and collective positive energy, and perhaps even some magic or miraculous force, continued to heal. live, love and learn. Challenged again at the beginning of this year with the realisation that there is now no more treatment available, she continues to live and learn with and from wonderful people who enter her life- such as her very compassionate palliative care doctor, David Currow, and the generous spirit of her lawyer, Chris

Winnall. It is because of such lived experiences that she so passionately teaches about the resiliency and the power of the human spirit to survive and expand its consciousness within us all.

Although she and Polly share so much in common, Julie's story is quite different. Over the past five years she has been continually bombarded with challenges that may have flattened others- and survived. Her resiliency has been tested on multiple levels. She has faced heart attacks, and minor strokes which led to several near death experiences, numerous losses and immensely stressful personal and business challenges. Following one particularly difficult couple of weeks earlier this year and in order to maintain her sanity, she was moved to create her own 'stress indicator' list from the experiences of one period of three weeks as a personal coping mechanism. It went like this:

- Sudden death of a partner
- A challenging year 9 class last period Friday
- Diagnosis of a blood clot and subsequent hospitalisation
- Writing a multimedia curriculum unit, almost finished, computer crashes losing 2 weeks of work. Deadline tomorrow
- Diagnosis of both breast cancer and cervical cancer
- Local council jackhammers the footpath outside your heritage house cracking all the internal plaster
- Finalisation of highly stressful and long term legal issues.
- One of your best friends has MS and needs support in a custody dispute over her severely abused grandchildren.
- Your first born announcing he's going to live in Japan
- Major business deal falls over losing you a considerable amount of money
- Your entire collection of family jewellery is stolen
- The aussie \$ is devalued by 15% and your company owes bills in American dollars.
- Your favourite vase is broken!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

What has sustained Julie, like Polly, is the realisation that most things are transient in life but the most important of all is love — specifically the love of family and friends, and the capacity to both give and receive love. All else to do with humans simply pales into insignificance. This has been reinforced by the recent tragic world events where it is connection — to others, to self and to our environment which are the critical factors which sustain us.

Both Julie and Polly feel blessed by their own families, their connection to their friends, their brushes with dying, the wonderful people who enter and stay integrated in their lives, and the wonderful experience of being immersed in a global pool of like minded souls. Both know that it is possible to face endings and experience them as renewed beginnings.

We both see these stories — our own lived realities — as wonderful gifts, because we have learnt so much about ourselves, our collective selves and our interdependence, and about the life force within us all that enables us to grow, to connect and to gain new understandings and insights from adversity.

Currently we continue to plan to write a book on a ‘Hedonist’s Guide to Dying’ — but we’re having too much fun to complete it!

It is not just our own experiences that inform us, and provide hope for the future. From the growing preventionist and resiliency research available, we know with great optimism that resiliency is an innate capacity within all of us, and that a traumatic childhood does not automatically lead to being a dysfunctional adult. A couple of decades ago, developmental psychologists and psychoanalysts would have advocated that relational wounds from childhood would have produced irremediable scars for life. Educators would have viewed children living in high risk condition - poverty, loss, violence, mentally ill parents... as highly likely to be educationally disadvantaged and less able to learn. It was believed that these children would recreate their childhood suffering and reproduce those same dysfunctional behaviours and conditions in their own adult lives. The exciting findings from research (Werner and Smith, 1992. Bernard, 1997) show us that most young people, in spite of trauma and great adversity can grow up to be competent responsible, caring adults. We all have the power to self right and transform. We can not only apply this innate self-righting mechanism in our own personal lives, but we can also use this knowledge to focus on promoting positive mental and physical health behaviours with young people and with colleagues in our workplaces. Being concerned about physical health is not just a matter of diet, exercise, cholesterol levels, smoking, blood pressure — it relates too to our psychological and social way of being in the world. In schools we, as educators are largely responsible for creating the way of being. We can make children’s lives heaven or hell in a sense by the way we relate, interact, think, and behave — the way of being that we promote and support. Increasingly we are recognising the strong links between the mind and the body; the physiological effects of stress and ongoing anxiety, and it seems that psycho-social factors are related to the vulnerability and defences that people have to disease. Those people in the workplace who do not feel that they have power to influence events — a sense of control and autonomy — often experience ill health. If demands are high and there is little latitude in discretion for responding to these demands, disease often results. A sense of loss of control biologically affects cortisol and hormone levels with adverse physical effects. Since feeling a sense of control is closely related to social support and communitarianism, we need to not only focus on assisting others to access and use their personal power, but to also focus on building a sense of community and inclusion for everyone. It is true that in some schools and educational institutions it is the deputies or middle managers who most feel this loss of control.

By learning from the resilient — ourselves and others, and by learning from research about the characteristics of resilient people and the protective factors that can be put into place to build resiliency, we as educators can draw on our individual resources and strengths to take responsibility for ensuring that we are nourishing and developing our own resiliency and personal well being. This then will enable us to take responsibility for building healthy schools and resilient organisations where the human spirit can be nurtured, honoured and released. Taking personal responsibility is the first step to a systemic approach to building resilient schools and communities.

It is never too late to learn about resiliency. A focus on resilience is clearly a generative approach to healthy human development. Traditionally organisations and individuals have responded to the issue of teacher stress reactively, and sought to reduce the physical responses to stress — relaxation, meditation, a balanced diet, exercise and adequate sleep. These things are important, but we also need to examine the intellectual, emotional and physiological responses to disruptions and stress, and determine effective ways to manage these, so that we may adopt a philosophy of learning, evolving, discovering and growing from life’s ongoing challenges. Instead of facing calamity or disruption with despair, resentment and a victim mentality, it is possible to gain new wisdom and compassion and to unlock some of life’s mysteries through our sufferings. We have this capacity within us.

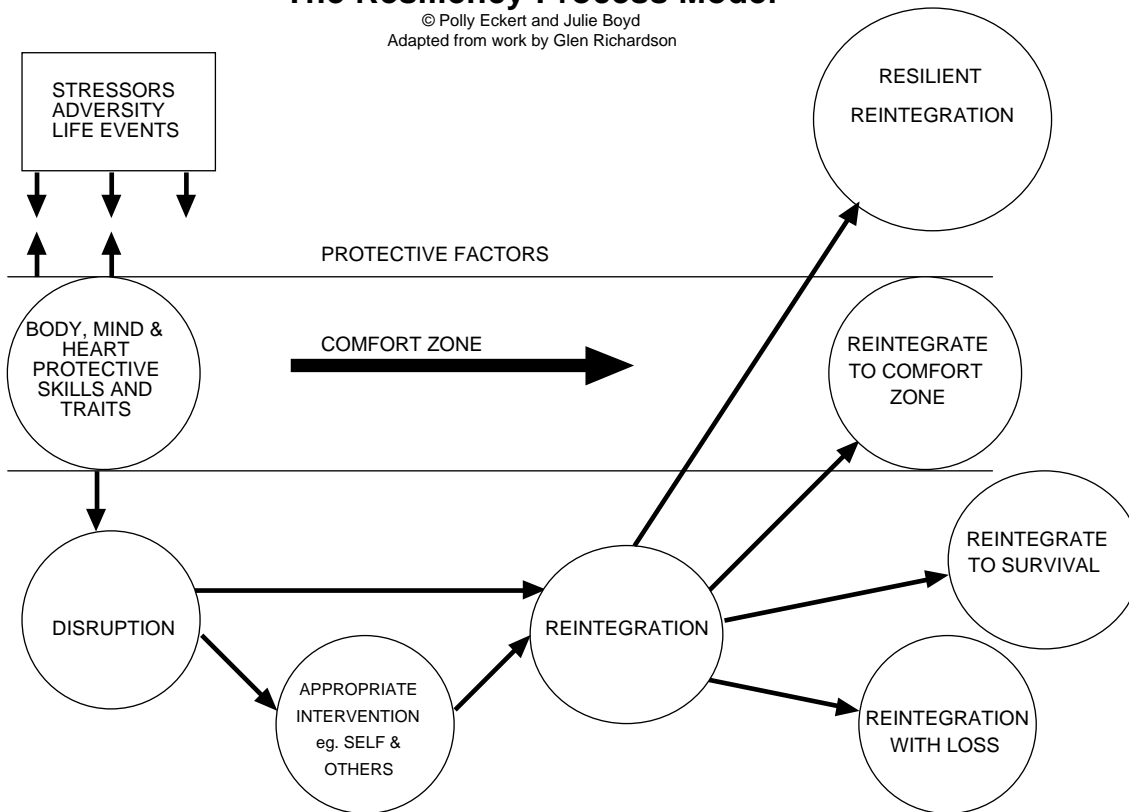
Our understanding of the nature of resiliency in our lives can be deepened by examining the nature of change (and development) in organisations and by relating this to the personal process.

Just as we are suggesting the need to move away from a simplistic physical response to stress in the individual to a more holistic, integrated response, so too are organisations needing to move away from seeing the organisation as a machine, and adopting a mechanistic, linear view of change. By adopting systems thinking, organisations can be seen as dynamic, living systems that are always inventing, adapting, changing and continuously creating. Like in natural living systems, chaos is an inevitable part of individual life and school life, and living systems change. We must reject the stable equilibrium paradigm (Stacey, 1992) that says success comes from stability, uniformity, and predicability, and that change can be managed, and disruptions dampened or made more manageable so that the planned change can occur in neat sequential steps. Rather the far from stable equilibrium paradigm (Stacey) suggests that creativity and new thinking and development is born from disruption or disintegration of the old — that order is achieved ultimately through fluctuations and chaos. Organisational change and new levels of being and understanding come about not through control and order in moment to moment events, but through allowing the internal disturbances or fluctuations that all systems inevitably have (because they are so open to environmental influences) to amplify until the new and different information coming into the organisation become so strong that the organisation can no longer function as it was and can no longer deal with things in its present state. At this stage the system can no longer sustain itself and must either disintegrate or breakthrough and reconfigure itself — to transform that which is known to create new meanings and to become a more adaptive and healthy system. Turbulence and chaos is seen then as a new ordering principle, and so organisational energies need to focus on how to deal constructively with all the newness that is possible instead of how to deal with resistance to change. Similarly as individuals we need to learn how to make appropriate responses and choices to the inevitable disruptions in life so that we can reintegrate and transform ourselves to a new order or state of being that surpasses what we are. This is not easy because the instinct for self renewal — for preserving what is already known — often leads us to reintegrate to the comfort zone or worse and to become a victim. Resilient reintegration taps into our system's instinct for self-organising and transforming. It enables us to become something better than we are.

The following model of the resiliency process helps us to understand how disturbances or disruptions in our lives may be responded to — in enabling, developmental ways or mere survival ways. It reminds us that we do have a choice and we can learn and grow through any experience. This in itself offers optimism and hope.

## The Resiliency Process Model

© Polly Eckert and Julie Boyd  
Adapted from work by Glen Richardson



The model shows us being in a **comfort zone** when our lives seem relatively stable and predictable- (remember there are actually periods like this!). All of us have developed **protective factors** that we use to keep ourselves in this comfort zone, and these may prevent us from changing. Protective factors are characteristics that have been learned from coping previously with life events, disruptions or stressors, or they may be genetic traits. We are made up of body, mind and spirit (heart) and these characteristics can be physical, mental and spiritual in nature. Dr Paul Pearsall — a neuroimmunophysiolgist, in his book ‘The Heart’s Code’ (a wonderful book highly recommended by Julie) postulates that rather than the brain being the centre of human intelligence, rather, the heart is, and as such he discusses ‘heart intelligence’ and how events impact our capacity to respond effectively.

There is **disruption** in our lives when we have not previously dealt with a life event effectively, yet we deem this event to be significant. This disruption stimulates the spirit, our energy source or the human heart, and may create feelings of doubt, anger, confusion, anxiety, pain, sadness or excitement. As such it is a positive force for energising some action.

This action is an attempt to deal with the life event or disruption — to seek to reintegrate or recover. Unless we are so unwell or clinically depressed and unable to take action (when intervention by others-loved ones or medical personnel — may be necessary), mostly we can choose how we re-integrate, and to what level.

We can reintegrate to a ‘resilient zone’, when we become someone greater than we were by learning, developing, gaining deeper insights and understandings that make us stronger and more knowing, loving and resilient. The disruption or life event has triggered off a new order and new learning. This is why some people become so much richer and stronger after experiencing some horrific or greatly challenging disruptions or stressors in their lives. Polly particularly feels this in her own life and talks about being

privileged to be living with a terminal illness, because of the amazing learning she is undergoing, and the consequent deepening of relationships with others that is emerging from this.

We can return to the comfort zone, as if we never experienced the disruption at all. We do not learn from the experience and so are likely to be disrupted all over again with the same intensity next time a similar event occurs. There is no growing as a human being in this process- only further assault on the body, mind and spirit. This in itself may trigger off more like disruptions.

We can become victims of our experiences by reintegrating with loss, and never recovering fully from the disruption. Our lives become emptier as we simply survive and live with less hope or enthusiasm.

As a framework for making sense of the resiliency process, the model is useful for ourselves and for assisting others to understand the nature of resiliency and the power of choice. It seems to us that this is a more optimistic and enabling way to live and be in environments of stress than to attempt to 'manage' stress in our lives. If we can assert some control over the way we respond to disruptions and stressors in our lives, and if we can realise the opportunities available to enable us to grow and learn and become better than we were, we may even be able to accept that such life events are natural and inevitable and potentially moments to expand and learn. We will focus on fostering resiliency and developing the skills of making wise choices and consequential thinking rather than putting energy into toughening our minds, bodies and spirits to combat stress in reactive ways. Organisations will invest in programs to develop resiliency in their people rather than providing stress relief programs that do nothing to shift the institutional forces at work that are creating the stress in the first place nor do nothing to empower the individual as a developing, learning, evolving human being. Organisations will ponder possibilities for putting protective factors into place that foster resiliency rather than conducting stress management programs. It seems absurd when an organisation puts increasing pressures and demands on its workers, and at the same time provides additional stress management programs.

This manual is designed to provide both practical and theoretical perspectives for expanding understandings and to integrate this with a variety of reflective self awareness and self nurturing practical activities to progress personal growth. They may be used individually or with peers as a way of developing dialogue and collegial learning conversations for looking at future possibilities. It is hoped that you this will trigger off your own creative thinking for generating other activities and processes.