Uncovering strengths of older people

And finding creative responses in social policy and service delivery

Heather Gibb  RN MPsyCh (Organizational) PhD
FCNA MCOPs
Acknowledging country
Relationship of successful ageing and resilience models

Successful ageing models are based on individual personality attributes.

Successful ageing and resilience involves a dynamic interaction: personality interacts dynamically with environmental resources, to maximize coping.

Resilience model of dynamic adaptation: life experience prompts people to undergo ‘resilient reintegration’. They acquire resilience through experience with adversity, building an adaptive response repertoire.
Resilience is:

- Unique in that it relates to positive growth, accumulated across the lifespan.
- An extra-ordinary response leading to rebounding from challenge and change. It triggers reintegration.
- A transformational process. Through resilience one becomes better off.
- Related to perceptions of purpose, meaning and control, and self efficacy.
Resilience across the lifespan

From Hochhalter et al 2011

Fig. 2.2 Resilience is possible when one can draw on the appropriate resources to meet the demands of a given challenge
Determinants of resilience

- Nothing universal
- Social network
- Subjective health status
- Physical exercise
- Spiritual/religious practice
Resilient qualities in older people

- Positive interpersonal relationships
- Strong self efficacy
- Positive self esteem
- A sense of purpose
- Spirituality
- Ability to use humour
- Creativity
- Acceptance of change (physical & mental)
- Ability to identify and use resources
- Self determination
- Optimism
Benefits of being resilient

- Better health outcomes
- Positive relationships
- Motivation reserves
- Adaptive coping style
Transcultural support factors from Gunnestad 2006

Network factors (external)

Resilience

Meaning, values & faith (existential)

Abilities & skills (internal)
Transcultural support factors from Gunnestad 2006

Network factors (external)

- Peers (spiritual or hobby groups)
- Professional ‘mentor’
- Family & long term friends
- Professional alumni
Transcultural support factors from Gunnestad 2006

Abilities & skills (internal)

- Innate abilities
- Ability through reintegration
- Skills that make use of innate abilities
- Skills acquired from challenges
Transcultural support factors from Gunnestad 2006

Meaning, values & faith (existential)

Support from cultural understandings e.g. one’s roles

Sense of coherence

Support from values derived from absolute beliefs

Support from faith in transcendent power
Acknowledging historical trauma in research into resilience in Indigenous cultures

- Colonisation – subjugation & loss
- Colonising research methodologies
- Coloniser knowledge used as the base for service policy
- A perspective is needed that recognises the cultural situatedness of mainstream service orientation
- De-colonising and de-paternalising approaches to research - use of research findings that respect and engage older & Indigenous people’s knowledge and ways of organising community.
What is the benefit of cross cultural research?

• We need to understand the determinants of a person’s resilience in the context of their own culture.
• It helps us understand how resilience is related to identity.
• This comparison can increase sensitivities to factors that are overlooked in research conducted in a mainstream context. It acknowledges our situated-ness as researchers discussing resilience.
• It extends our knowledge and understanding of what community supports and resources are needed for all older people to have the opportunity to be resilient.
The role of religion/spirituality:

- Strongly associated with enhancing meaning in one’s life and a sense of greater control
- Associated with strong social support
- Has a unique contribution to resilience beyond what is explicable in terms of psychosocial resources
- Use of spiritual or religious resources to enhance resilience must be contextualized by a full understanding of the nature of spirituality the person holds
- Most research on spirituality and resilience in older age has been carried out in a mainstream Christian context
What can be done to support older people being resilient

• Support them to maintain self esteem (self acceptance and value) through offering opportunities where they can experience success (self efficacy)
• Help them engage with a sense of purpose
• Help them strengthen expression of whatever spirituality they connect with (curiosity and new creative endeavours)
• Provide appropriate challenges that draw on self determination (I can!) and abilities to succeed
• Support the focus on positive thinking
Strategies for meaningful volunteer engagement

- Internationally, legal definitions for civic engagement have been refined to target meaningful volunteering opportunities for retired people:
  - Meeting critical community needs
  - Retaining skills from prior work
  - Mentoring new workers and business developers
- Incentives have been created that add sense of value to volunteer work e.g. the ‘Serve America Act’
  - Small stipends for volunteering
  - Free public transport
  - Fellowship program, like a visiting scholar
  - Higher education awards for outstanding volunteer services
  - Education credits
- Expectations set by gov on how organizations will leverage off resources of the baby boomers in retirement
- Recruitment needs to be active e.g. Serve.gov is a US marketing website for seeking volunteer recruits
Can we change policy and government practices through our research?

• Understanding elders’ motivators for resilience, leads to more motivating community activities e.g. skills workshops run by older people.

• Understanding what constitutes purpose, sustained self efficacy and self esteem, leads to targeted opportunities for community volunteering.
Summary

• We know that what makes one resilient is unique to every individual
• Life stories are needed to unlock the components of that person’s resilience in the tough times of older age
• We have not yet begun to imagine how, based on those discoveries, services and social policies can help life be the best possible


