

# MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

## RAISING PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

According to Harvard University's Center for the Developing Child (2016), the capacities developed during childhood are the building blocks of a well-functioning adult. Investing in a child's academic, social and emotional development impacts the developing brain and provides a foundation of tools to use and build upon to solve problems and handle adversity throughout life.

Decades of research confirms that **RELATIONSHIPS and RESILIENCE** are central to raising psychologically healthy children. Together they help explain how healthy development occurs, what can get it off track, and what can be done to restore it.

### RELATIONSHIPS

- ✓ Responsive relationships and positive experiences build strong brain architecture
- ✓ Brains are built over time and the interaction of genes and experiences shapes the "circuitry" of the developing brain
- ✓ Children's experiences with all the people consistently in their lives have a strong influence on the child's brain structure and function
- ✓ Skill begets skill as brains develop from the bottom up, with increasingly complex circuits building on simpler circuits, and increasingly complex and adaptive skills emerging over time
- ✓ The gradual acquisition of higher-level skills (ability to focus and sustain attention, set goals, follow rules, solve problems, and control impulses), is driven by the development of the prefrontal cortex
- ✓ Significant prefrontal cortex development happens in childhood as critical connections are forged between this region and other parts of the brain that it controls
- ✓ This circuitry, called **executive function** and **self-regulation**, becomes more efficient during adolescence and these higher-level capacities serve as the brain's "air traffic control system," which enables planning, monitoring, and managing multiple streams of information at the same time
- ✓ Children aren't born with these capabilities, but they're born with the potential to acquire them within the context of responsive relationships that model skills and support their development

*Executive function skills help us plan, focus attention, switch gears, and juggle multiple tasks—much like an air traffic control system at a busy airport.*

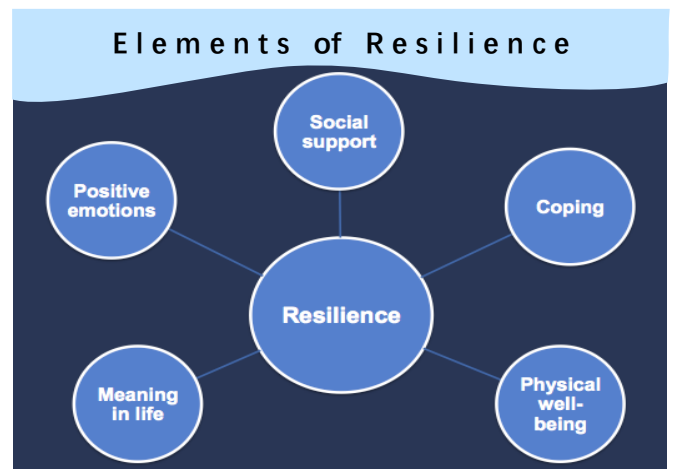


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## RESILIENCE

- ✓ Growing the capacity to quickly recover from difficulties builds resilience
- ✓ Personal factors that help build resilience include having a positive attitude, optimism, emotional regulation skills, and the ability to see failure as a form of helpful feedback
- ✓ Children who have acquired a **strong emotional foundation** have the capacity to anticipate, talk about, and use their awareness of their own and others' feelings to better manage everyday social interactions and cultivate resilience
- ✓ Young children are capable of surprisingly deep and intense feelings of sadness (including depression), grief, anxiety, and anger (which can result in unmanageable aggression), as well as the heights of joy and happiness
- ✓ Early abilities are important not only for the foundation of resilience and **emotional regulation** for the future, but also for the current **social functioning** with parents, teachers and peers
- ✓ Protective factors in the child and adolescent years strengthen resilience
- ✓ Children and adolescents need to develop the social and emotional capabilities that enable them to focus, pay attention, and get along with peers just as much as they need to develop the cognitive skills required to master academic concepts

*Science demonstrates that it is the **reliable presence** of at least one supportive relationship and **multiple opportunities for developing effective coping skills** that are the essential building blocks for strengthening the capacity to do well in the face of significant adversity.*





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## Underlying Issues that Fuel Anger

**Attention:** Some people use their anger to be noticed. If a person craves or lacks attention, it doesn't matter whether that attention is positive or negative, as long as someone notices them.

**Avoidance:** Anger can be used as a tactic to avoid responsibility. Whether conscious or unconscious, if a person doesn't want to do something, anger can be used to get out of it.

**Conditioning:** Anger may be an automatic response that has been conditioned over time. Something happens, anger is expressed in response, and the person gets what he or she wanted – a temporary feeling of relief, power over someone or a situation, or something else. Through conditioning, some people feel as if they must respond in anger, otherwise they will be taken advantage of. For example, the automatic thought process might be *"If I don't respond in anger to exert control over the situation, others will think I am weak and then I will be hurt or manipulated."*

**Feeling Insignificant:** Some people feel small and unimportant inside. Anger works to provoke, awaken or build-up the courage to do something that they wouldn't normally do.

**Frustration:** Some people become mad or angry when they are unsatisfied, annoyed or exasperated. Frustration happens for many reasons, such as not being able to do something you wish or as you intended, when other people do things that bother you, when circumstances are out of your control and more. Instead of thinking through the situation and dealing with it in a reasoned manner, or working out the energy physically, anger escalates to a point where it explodes, resulting in a wide range of negative consequences.

**Genetics:** There are some people with a biological predisposition towards anger and aggression. While non-hereditary (environmental) factors, such as growing up in a troubled family, contribute to how someone expresses anger, hereditary (genetic) factors also play a role in how someone is inclined to behave and express emotions.

**Intimidation:** Some people use anger to frighten, threaten, bully, pressure and coerce others to get what they want. They use intimidation to control other people.

**Irritation:** Being impatient, annoyed and inconvenienced can prompt anger. Daily incidents such as regular interruptions or constant reminders can cause a person to become irritated. When the irritations are persistent, they can grow and turn into a sudden fit of rage, causing harm to self or others.

**Unfair Treatment:** When someone is blamed for things or believes they have been treated inequitably or unjustly, it can trigger anger that leads to negative consequences. Even when blame is warranted or correct, angry-prone people can still feel that they have been wronged and seek retribution against those who have challenged them to rectify an injustice.

**Stress:** Feeling stressed or in distress is often associated with anger. It's hard to feel angry when one is calm. Many people use the term stress for any situation involving the slightest difficulty or challenge, but this dilutes the seriousness of the condition for those who are genuinely stressed. Persistent stress can lead to distress which is mental or emotional tension associated with feelings of anger, frustration or anxiousness caused by adverse or demanding circumstances, situations or thoughts (collectively referred to as stressors). Ongoing stress can ignite anger responses.

**Medically-related Factors:** Certain neurological conditions, such as Alzheimer's, seizure disorders, brain tumors, concussions, chemical imbalances or structural brain abnormalities can contribute to anger. Substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, paranoid or personality disorders, schizophrenia, bi-polar, mood disorders, medication interactions and even attention deficit hyperactivity disorders can all be additional risk factors for anger.

**Gender-related Issues:** Adult and adolescent males comprise nearly 80% of people diagnosed with severe anger issues, such as intermittent explosive rages. Women commonly associate their anger with premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Social norms and expectations impact how men and women express their anger and what is considered to be acceptable and unacceptable.

## Talk to Someone Who Can Help

Clarity Psychological Services provides personalized, compassionate, respectful, and competent psychological services in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating the full spectrum of mental health issues for people across the lifespan.



## ANGER...

Many things can cause or provoke anger in people. The **feeling** of anger is an acceptable emotion. The **expression** of anger is where we can get into trouble if it is done in an unhealthy, destructive manner.

When we are angry, we often have a false sense of strength, energy, authority, control or power. Anger-prone individuals can easily become caught in a downward spiral as a result of their outbursts. Lashing out in anger can feel temporarily redemptive, but this type of release is usually fleeting because hurtful words and actions don't produce positive outcomes for anyone involved.

Anger provides a brief false feeling of freedom and power that is lacking, but it also blocks out logical thought processes and produces a sense of being absolutely right. Anger also provides a sense of justification, but it erodes self-control. Negative thoughts and feelings that are usually better left unsaid are blurred out. Of course, after the surge of anger passes, it's impossible to take the words and actions back. The damage is done. Even if there's an apology, the after-effects remain and take time to repair.

If we understand why people feel and express anger, we can address the causes and prevent inappropriate angry outbursts.

