



## **Caregiver Support Line Audio Recording - Transcript**

**Series:** Care for the Caregiver

**Topic:** Safe Haven: Building on Family Strength

Hello. I am so pleased that you were able to set aside this time to listen to this presentation.

We all know how difficult it can be to take the time to focus on you and your own needs, so we hope this presentation will be a worthy use of your valuable time.

The topic for this presentation is, "Safe Haven Building on Family Strength." I want to start by giving you a bit of an overview that describes how we will focus our time. We are going to talk about family strength or family resiliency, and why it matters if we have it. Most families have strengths that they naturally draw upon but often we don't notice them, or may take them for granted.

It helps to know what our family strengths are so that we can seek them out and draw on them during difficult life changes. Family strength is also something that we can build and improve upon.

In this presentation, we will look at some of the ways in which you may consider working to recognize and build upon your family resilience. We will define what resilience means, how to develop it, and how you can build and adapt to strengthen your own family.

Let's get started. First, let's consider some stresses that may challenge your family resilience. Stress to families can come in many forms such as divorce, financial problems, illness, death of members, or typical life cycle changes such as marriage, having children, leaving home, or aging. There are also unique sources of stress for military families such as long deployments, separation, frequent moves, loss of function due to illness or injury, or ongoing mental health or substance abuse issues.

All families, to some degree or another, are confronted with the challenges of stress. When faced with crisis, some families do well in managing stress.

We hope to identify the qualities and specific practices that resilient families engage in.

Certainly some families have had to cope with one stressor after the next. Even the most resilient families may feel depleted if coping with one stress after the next;



however, there is hope that even the most depleted families can rekindle their strength by returning to the qualities and practices that foster their strength and resilience.

Before we define family resilience and what is involved in building family strength, let's first define the term, family. What is a family?

Your definition of family may be different from others. Do those you consider family all live in your house? Maybe you consider family to include friends, neighbors, or members of your extended family. Each of us defines our family in different ways.

One thing to consider is that the definition of your family may change over time and when that change occurs, you may need to adapt. Perhaps someone relocates, or you experience the death of a family member or the birth of a baby. Maybe, someone gets married or divorced. The boundaries and your definition of family may change over time regarding who's in and who's out, and your ability to adapt to this change can be a challenge. What is important is to continue to adapt so that you have the benefit and shared support that family provides.

Now that you've identified your family, let's talk about what it means to be resilient. Resilience doesn't mean that you don't react or experience all the pain that comes from adversity or stress. The definition of resilience is the ability to withstand, adapt, recover and/or grow in the face of challenges and demands.

Resilience means drawing on all our strengths and not only using them to cope with difficulties, but actually learning and making the most of our trouble. You know the old saying, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade?"

Adversity can, in fact, make us stronger. Whether facing challenges individually or as a family, getting through our challenges can provide a powerful opportunity for changing and growing. New skills are able to be developed that can make us stronger and better able to cope in the future.

Family resilience is like the glue that keeps you and your family together when life stresses are pulling at you. Today, we are going to look at where your family resilience comes from so that it can be identified and strengthened. Family resilience recognizes the influence of all the potential connections and relationships that your family may include. So, if you are saying, "I am all alone in this," and either have no family or feel your family is of no help, this is an opportunity to think beyond whatever limitations you are seeing and open up to the idea that our family is how we define it.



Family support can come from the youngest member to the oldest, as well as from extended family and community. There is a family network that you can grow and build upon to be there for you. Even reaching out to one new person for support can impact your resilience.

So now, let's think for a moment. What are the aspects of your particular family that help you get through stressful or difficult times? When was the last time your family faced a crisis, a loss, or a life challenge? What did you do together that made the crisis bearable? What aspects of your family provide comfort, security, and order during a hard time?

Each family is unique and each family will have its own unique way of being resilient. There is a lot of literature about resiliency and some of the literature suggests that there are three specific areas that may contribute the most to a family's strength. Remember, it's okay if you're not feeling resilient right now. This is a starting point.

Let's begin by looking at one of the qualities identified in the literature that contributes to family resilience called shared beliefs. How does a belief, a thought, a common idea or value, actually help you get through a hard time?

Think for instance, about a team or a military troop. Think about a coach that is able to make winning teams out of players that aren't star athletes, or about courageous military leaders who inspire their troops to succeed. How are the individual members engaged with one another, so they become more able to withstand difficulty? These coaches and military leaders inspire others using a shared belief and strong leadership.

Through shared beliefs and strong leadership, resilient families create an atmosphere of hope, togetherness, a shared purpose, meaning, and a shared direction which can provide the support and momentum to continue forging on in the face of great adversity.

Let's look at an example of shared belief and leadership. Maybe you witnessed your own mother care for your large family after your father passed away. Her strength inspired everyone in the family to pull together, and her leadership encouraged the whole family to carry on. Sometimes now you may think of her, and you may again draw on her example for strength.

One of the reasons it may be difficult to imagine your shared beliefs is that often times these values and beliefs are passed down from the stories we share about one another and what matters to our families. The power of these beliefs may not be obvious



because they may not be spoken or taught explicitly, but we learn them by watching one another. Seeing a family member struggle well, struggle to hold on to what matters, what they fight for and what matters to them, sends a strong message.

All of these images, these powerful inherited strands of beliefs, have left an impression that we hold onto tightly when things are hard. Each family has the opportunity to remember and harness these examples, to give them strength and direction during hard times.

Resilient families may view crises as a shared challenge that together they can understand, manage and make meaningful in some way. Who inspired you? What motto does your family live by to make it through tough times?

Let's consider some examples.

"We are loyal. For as many struggles as we've endured, we are committed to one another and are focused on moving forward."

"We take care of our own."

"We are fun and social. We find that it helps to connect with other people and laugh to relieve stress."

For example, maybe family members have faith or spiritual beliefs that define how they make sense of things, and that is what you turn toward to get perspective and calm.

Maybe your family shared values about caring for each other; and because of that you know that you can turn to your family when you are feeling angry or fed up, and you know that they will be there to let you vent.

Some families may believe that your home or your land is what is most valued and you can find comfort in returning to the land or working in your garden.

Sometimes it is how your family makes sense of difficulty that helps you all come through it together. Let's take a couple of minutes to try to reflect on how your family makes sense of the hard times. Perhaps you're you thinking:

"I know that my trouble will make me stronger."

"Everything good and bad has something to teach me."



Your family story and beliefs can be your source of comfort, direction, and give you a sense of meaning that can keep you moving forward despite whatever struggle you are facing.

Resilient families seem to have a positive outlook. They have hope they will pull through even if it is incredibly hard and even if there are moments when it seems impossible.

Family members who notice each other's strengths and offer encouragement to overcome difficulties are actually contributing to the family resilience and hope for the future. Resilient families imagine what can be, rather than giving up and thinking, "This situation is hopeless."

As we are thinking about inspiration and hope, think about your own family. How do you inspire one another and what hopeful beliefs do you hold onto? Some people find hope in their spiritual beliefs, some look to nature for transcendence, some call on their faith or their religious rituals. Our spiritual beliefs, practices and rituals can be a source of comfort and connection and can remind us of what really matters to us. Now that you have identified your family's shared beliefs, take note, and remember this the next time you are faced with a crisis. Think of those family members, coaches, and leaders that have inspired you by their example of persistence, resilience, and hopefulness. These beliefs will help keep your family strong, positive, hopeful and moving forward.

Now that you have given some thought to how a shared belief can help, we are going to talk about the next quality researchers identified that contributes to resilience. That quality is organization.

When we look at organization, we are focusing on how your family comes together and how your family organizes itself. A sense of order can bring about great comfort and strength when faced with a crisis.

Just like a good business, families that are well organized can often ride out difficulties in a more purposeful way than if they are disorganized. When people know who has what role, what the rules and expectations are, and what the routine is, people function better and get the job done. People are able to reach their goals if these structures are in place.

Just like in an organization, what impacts one part of the company, will affect the whole company.



Just as each family member can be affected by stress, family members can also shoulder the burden together and support one another.

In family organization, resilience can be fostered through clear but flexible structure. By structure we mean who is in charge, the roles, expectations and responsibilities that go along with each role, and the day to day routine.

A sense of teamwork is often most noted in military families. Just as in the military, families require structure, boundaries, roles, and responsibilities for which each member is held accountable.

Families benefit from order and structure, however, resilience also depends on the ability to adapt and be flexible to the changes and demands encountered. There is both comfort and security in knowing what to expect and also in feeling confident that the unexpected is still able to be managed.

Maybe there have been changes in the membership of your family. How do roles change then?

Maybe there has been divorce or separation but both parents maintain their shared parenting and work together as leaders to provide stability.

Resilient families are able to adapt to changes, shift roles and patterns while also creating stability and order. Are you able to adapt and change roles? If you have lost your leader, who takes charge and works to delegate new tasks?

Take some time to think about your own family. Has your family changed? If so, how has it changed? Who is in a leadership role? What are your responsibilities and what routines provide your family comfort?

Finally, let's discuss the importance of communication. Resilient families create a safe environment for members to share feelings openly and appropriately. They practice honest communication and the value is shared consistently among members. This means that feelings of all members, young or old, are heard and respected.

Why is communication during a crisis important? Communication has a calming effect. Sometimes just knowing what's going on and having information can relieve anxiety and fear. Communication among family members has to be clear and consistent. For example, if a family member asks how you are and you respond that you are fine but



are acting very frenzied and anxious, that will send the wrong message and may provoke more anxiety.

When the youngest family member to the oldest is able to share thoughts and feelings regardless of age, this honesty often makes a tough situation safer. It is okay if your family struggles to be honest and open in communicating feelings, but the small steps that you take to be more open or support another member's feelings can go a long way to creating stronger connections with one another.

Furthermore, this openness can lead to shared problem-solving and brainstorming of good solutions you may be surprised. Even though you never expected it, your grade school child may have some pretty insightful observations or interesting solutions to a problem if they are just afforded an opportunity to contribute.

Think about your own family. How do you invite communication? Some families share stories with one another through fun activities. Maybe you and your family enjoy camping, hiking, or enjoy being outdoors. All of these activities can help improve and foster a healthy environment for communication.

When faced with a crisis, you have already developed a safe place for family members to sit down together and share feelings, if you are regularly engaging in activities to communicate and connect.

Think about what your family currently does to foster a safe environment for open communication. Are there activities that you might want to engage in to invite communication and connection?

It is understandable there are going to be times when you may be discouraged and overwhelmed. In some cases it may be helpful to seek professional help to assist you in improving the lines of communication within your family. Please know that it is okay to ask for help. There are professionals trained to assist so you don't feel so overwhelmed and alone.

Let's take a couple of minutes and summarize. Think about which areas are strong and which need some attention and support. No family is perfect and everyone struggles in the face of life changes or challenges. The hopeful news is that we can make changes so that our family becomes a greater source of comfort and strength. Let's review some of the ways you may consider.

First, identify your family values and beliefs.





What values does your family live by and who has set an example to inspire you? Consider looking at the crisis in a different way to find meaning. Try to look for opportunities for self-discovery. You may learn something about yourself during a crisis.

Second, review your family organization and make order if there is chaos.

Take on a leadership role within your family system or support those who are in leadership. Create a routine and clarify roles and responsibilities. Build in routine and rituals that your family can count on and in which your family can find comfort.

Third, communicate openly.

Create an environment where each family member's feelings and perspectives are respected and taken into consideration. Use your family time to communicate, to share your thoughts and feelings, and to enjoy one another.

Finally, and most importantly, take care of yourself.

Pay attention to your own feelings and needs. Draw on the glue that holds you and your family together. We, at the Caregiver Support Line support you and honor the powerful bonds of family that keep you moving forward.

I hope you found this presentation a worthy use of your time. Thank you for listening. If you are a Caregiver of a Veteran and would like to discuss any of the ideas offered during this presentation, I invite you to contact your local Caregiver Support Coordinator. You may also contact a social worker at the Caregiver Support Line at 855-260-3274.

Thank you for all you do.