Two families have homes heavily damaged by a tornado. One family appears to be coping well, while the other seems to be in a tailspin. Why does one family cope better than another during a crisis?

It’s called Family Resilience. Family resilience is the ability of a family to function well when facing a stress. The type of stress can be almost anything, from a serious illness, to the onset of financial trouble, or any type of major change including marriage, divorce, moving, changes related to work, or many other types of circumstances.

One way to think of resilience is to compare it to a rubber band. In order for a rubber band to move forward we first need to pull it back. The same goes for life. Something might happen that knocks us back, but if we are resilient, we find the strength to stretch ourselves and move forward.

In general, most families go through a period of “disorganization” immediately after a stressful event. However, the exact same event can happen to different families, and their reactions could be completely different. Research suggests that different reactions are the result of the varying resources families had available to them before the crisis struck, as well as whether a family is cohesive and generally has a positive outlook on life.

Key strategies for Family Resilience can be categorized into three areas: Family Belief Systems, Family Organization and Resources, and Family Communication.

Family Belief Systems

- Make meaning of crisis and challenge-Resilient families have shared responsibilities, in contrast to relying on “the strong one” in the family getting through the adversity. They believe that together, they strengthen their ability to meet challenges.
- Maintain a positive outlook-Resilient families are optimistic. They encourage each other, reinforcing confidence, and a “can do” spirit. Resilient families take stock of the situation, accept the things beyond their control, and focus their energies on making the best the situation
- Value spirituality-Resilient families are able to find meaning and purpose, and can connect to something beyond their immediate problem. Their moral and spiritual values are a source of strength. They see themselves as part of something bigger, and take a larger view of the crisis.
Family Organization and Resources

- Flexible-Resilient families are flexible and do not rely on rigid concepts of family roles or rules. This allows them to more easily adapt to the changes that often come with a crisis or adversity. While people often refer to “bouncing back” after a crisis, resilience might be seen as “bouncing forward.”
- Connected-Resilient families know they can count on each other. They respect each other’s individual differences, separateness, and boundaries.
- Supported by social and economic resources-Resilient families maintain a network of extended family, friends, and neighbors that provide practical assistance (information, concrete services), emotional support, and connections to the larger community during challenging times. Resilient families recognize when they need help and accept it.

Family Communication

- Share clear, consistent messages Resilient families “say what they mean,” and “mean what they say.” Communication that is direct, clear, specific, consistent, and honest. This type of communication sets the stage for shared decision making about how the family will move forward in the face of crisis.
- Openly express their emotions Resilient families have mutual trust. They can express their feelings and opinions, and provide empathy, and comfort to one another. Resilient families appropriately use humor to revitalize family members under stress.
- Use collaborative problem solving Resilient families focus on achievable goals and concrete steps for achieving those goals. They identify a problem, brainstorm possible solutions, and select the best option. They value each other’s ideas.

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For more information on this or other family and consumer sciences related topics, contact Shelly Barnes, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agent for UT Extension in Wilson County. Barnes can be reached at sbarnes@utk.edu or 615-444-9584.

Credit to Belinda Riddle, UT Extension, Coffee County