

Stress, Resilience, & the Power of Support: Helping Youth Navigate Challenges



Katherine Nguyen Williams, Ph.D.

**Child & Adolescent Psychologist
Rady Children's Hospital San Diego
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
UC San Diego School of Medicine**

The Modern Child

The science of raising children

Katherine Nguyen Williams Ph.D.

 SHARE
  TWEET
  EMAIL
  MORE



5 Tips for Talking to Children About Mass Shootings

Research explains how to help children cope after hearing about mass shootings.



The Refugee Child: An American Story

Throughout history, most Americans have not supported refugee resettlement stateside. Studies tell us why we should or shouldn't listen to them.



How to Talk to Children About Spade and Bourdain Suicides

Anthony Bourdain's mother said, "He is absolutely the last person in the world I would have ever dreamed would do something like this." How can we tell if our children are at risk?

The Modern Child

The science of raising children



Katherine Nguyen Williams, Ph.D., is the Director of Strategic Development and Clinical Innovations at Rady Children's Hospital—San Diego and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UC San Diego.

Books by Katherine Nguyen Williams



Modular CBT for Children and Adolescents with Depression: A Clinician's Guide to Individualized Treatment



Agenda

- Understanding Youth Stress
- Building Resiliency Skills
- The Power of Support: How Parents & Caregivers Can Help
- Q&A



What Is Mental Wellness?

Mental wellness is an internal resource that helps us think, feel, connect, and function; it is an active process that helps us to build resilience, grow, and flourish.

Mental wellness is a **resource** because it is dynamic, renewable, and positive.

Mental wellness is a **process** that we must engage in proactively, it is not a static state of being.

Mental wellness is not only “mental” but has **several dimensions**:



THINKING
Mental Dimension



CONNECTING
Social Dimension



FEELING
Emotional Dimension

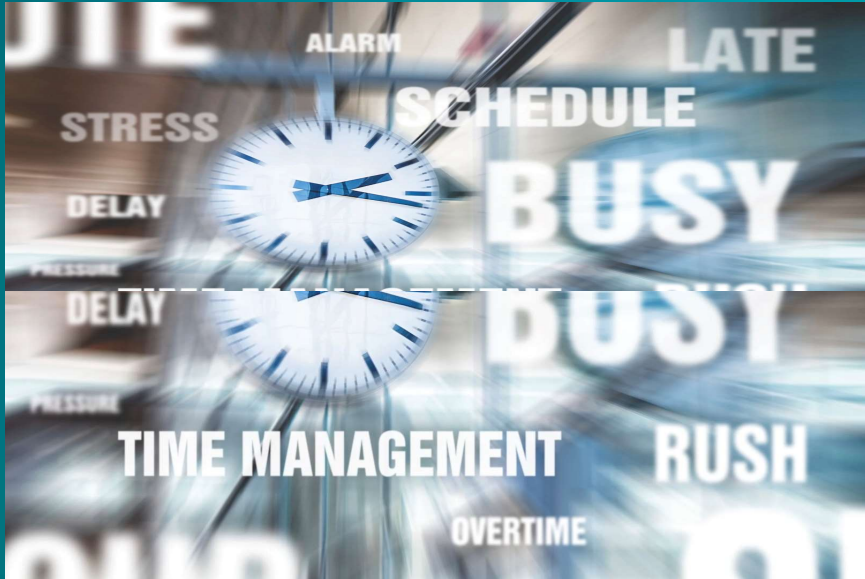


FUNCTIONING
Psychological Dimension

Current State of Mental Health

- 1 in 5 adolescents experience a mental health issue each year.
- 50% of mental health issues start by age 14, and 75% by age 24.
- Adverse childhood experiences have lifelong mental health effects.
- 10% of children (5-16 years) have a diagnosable condition, yet 70% don't receive early intervention.

What is Stress?

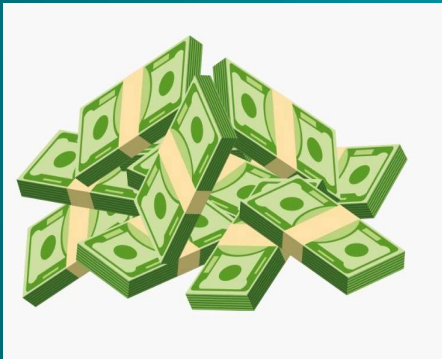


It is the body's response to pressure or challenges.

It can be motivating or overwhelming, affecting well-being.

Common Sources of Stress

- **School Stress:** academics, test anxiety, extracurriculars, college
- **Interpersonal Stress:** friendships, dating, family, social media
- **News & World Events:** violence, politics, finances



Benefits of Stress

- Enhances focus and motivation
- Builds resilience and coping skills
- Encourages growth and learning
- Improves problem-solving
- Helps prioritize what matters

Why Youth May Struggle



- **Genetic Factors:** Some teens are naturally more sensitive to stress, affecting how they handle challenges.
- **Early Life Experiences:** Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can weaken resilience, increasing anxiety and stress.
- **Social Environment:** Lack of support, bullying, and societal pressures can make it harder to develop resilience.
- **Mental Health Factors:** Anxiety and other conditions can make coping with stress more difficult.

What to Look Out For

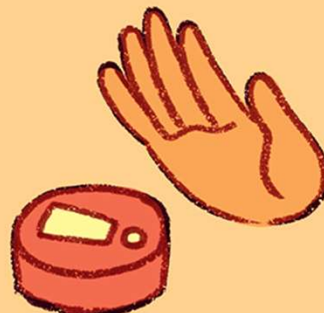
- Withdrawn/Irritable
- Decline in school performance
- Physical appearance
- Aggressive behavior
- Risk taking behavior
- Changes in eating/sleeping habits
- Self harming behaviors
- Avoidance or absenteeism from school, youth club
- Lack of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Physical (headaches, GI issues)



Signs of Emotional Dysregulation



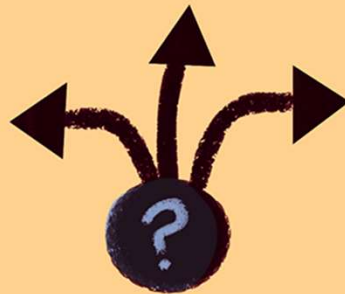
Overly intense emotions



Impulsive behavior



Lack of emotional awareness



Trouble making decisions



Inability to manage behavior



Avoids difficult emotions

Building Resilience in Youth



What is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and grow stronger in response to challenges, stress, or adversity.

The good news is these responses ***can be learned.***

Resilience is the ability to “roll with the punches”

What it is:

- You can keep on going despite facing stressors or tragedy, or feeling anxious or overwhelmed
- You can go on with daily tasks, remain generally optimistic, and move forward with your life

What it's not:

- Resiliency doesn't mean you ignore your feelings; when you have a problem, you may still experience anger, grief, or pain
- Being resilient doesn't mean being unemotional or going at it alone

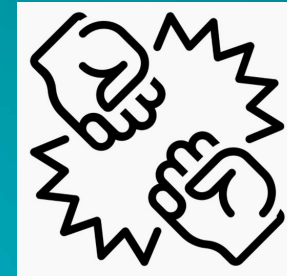
The Science of Resilience

- **Cognitive Flexibility:** Adapting thoughts and behaviors in response to stress, enhancing problem-solving skills.
- **Stress Hormones:** Resilient individuals manage cortisol (stress hormone) effectively, preventing long-term physical damage.
- **Neuroplasticity:** The brain reorganizes and forms new neural connections after challenges, helping individuals grow stronger emotionally and mentally.

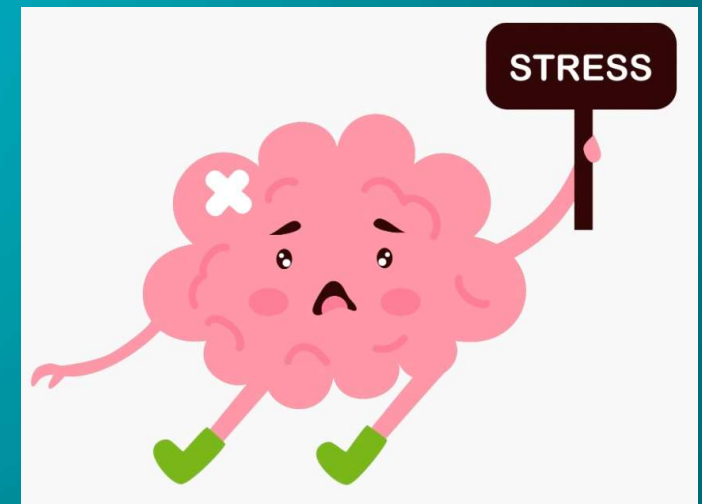


The Science of Resilience

The body reacts to stress through the **fight-or-flight response** (activation of adrenaline and cortisol).



Chronic Stress: If stress is prolonged, this can disrupt the brain's ability to function well, which then can impair memory, emotions, and decision-making.



The Science of Resilience

Resilient individuals tend to:

- Stay calmer throughout stressful event
- Think more clearly under stress
- Recover faster after stressful event
- Learn to manage stress more effectively the next time it happens



Key Protective Factors (Individual)

- **Positive mindset:** Viewing challenges as opportunities for growth.
- **Self-regulation:** Managing emotions, stress, and impulses.
- **Problem-solving:** Tackling difficulties constructively.
- **Self-efficacy:** Belief in one's ability to succeed.
- **Sense of purpose:** Having goals, values, and meaning.
- **Healthy coping:** Using positive strategies (e.g., exercise, journaling, creativity).

Key Protective Factors (Family)

- **Supportive relationships:** Feeling loved and encouraged by family.
- **Consistent structure:** Clear expectations and routines.
- **Parental resilience:** Caregivers model positive coping.
- **Open communication:** Safe space to discuss emotions.
- **Cultural identity:** Connection to traditions and belonging.

The Power of Support: How Parents & Caregivers Can Help



Creating a Home Environment that Fosters Resilience



- Emotional check-ins
- Encouraging autonomy and problem solving
- Modeling healthy stress responses
- Building connections through small moments

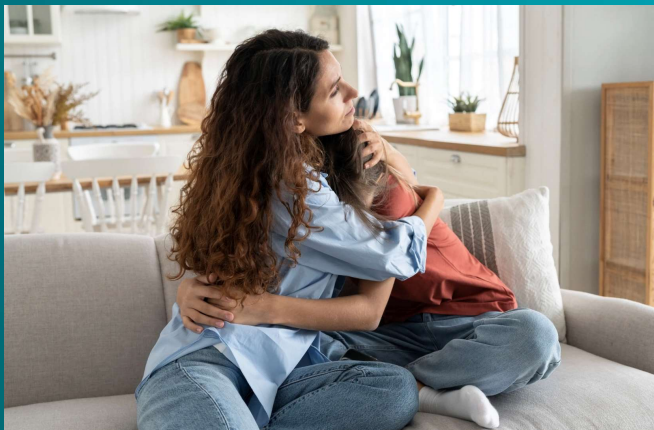
Stop, Drop, & Roll

When a challenge arises with your child, remember to:



Stop to acknowledge the situation

Drop to their eye level



Roll with the conversation to understand their feelings

Distress Tolerance as Crisis Survival Skills

Youth need to use their learned crisis survival skills when:

The child/teen is in a situation that is:

- Highly stressful
- Short-Term
- Creating intense pressure to resolve the crisis now

AND

- Acting on their emotions and urges will make things worse
- The situation may not be able to be improved right away
- Youth can learn to temporarily tolerate challenging events and emotions

Distress Tolerance

“How to get through a crisis without making things worse”

TIPP Skills



**TIP YOUR
TEMPERATURE**



INTENSELY EXERCISE



**PACE YOUR
BREATHING**



**PROGRESSIVELY RELAX
YOUR MUSCLES**



More Ways to Help

- **Let them fail sometimes**
 - Working through small challenges teaches them they CAN manage difficult situations
- **Be supportive without adding to the stress**
 - Step in to help if requested, aka “scaffolding”
 - Step back and show kindness otherwise
- **Support gradual exposure to stressors**
 - Public speaking
 - New experiences
 - Give opportunities for the child to try “stressful” activities

HOPE

(Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences)

How can you offer support in each category?



Relationships

- Stable and nurturing
- Peer-to-peer and with adults
- Established through interpersonal activities

Environments

- Safe space to live, learn, and grow
- Access to basic needs
- Feel emotionally and physically safe

Engagement

- Involved in social activities that provide connection and sense of belonging, e.g. service projects, sports, clubs

Emotional Growth

- By playing and interacting with peers for self-awareness and self-regulation

Child & Adolescent Psychologist's Top Tips for Wellness



Executive Functioning

- What this looks like at each level
 - Elementary
 - Middle
 - High School
- What parents can do to help
 - Home routine
 - Organizational Skills Training (Gallagher, 2014)
 - Time management



Identifying Cognitive Patterns

Common Cognitive Distortions



Black & white thinking
(or all-or nothing) thinking
Thinking in "either/or" categories where there is no middle ground.



Overgeneralizing
Thinking that makes a conclusion based on a single piece of evidence.



Fortune-telling
Thinking which assumes what will happen based on little or no evidence.



"Should" statements
Expectations about what a person "should" do, which are enforced on oneself or others.



Control fallacies
Beliefs that a person either has complete control of themselves & their circumstances, or that a person's life is entirely controlled by external factors.



Mind-reading
Thinking that assumes what other people's reasons or intentions are, with little or no evidence.



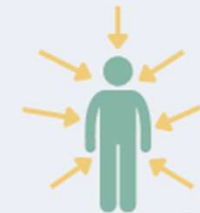
Labelling
Thinking that assigns a judgmental label to oneself or others based on a single incident.



Catastrophizing
Thinking which leads to worries escalating quickly to worst-case scenarios.



Mental filtering
Thinking that "filters out" all of the positive and remembers or perceives only the negative aspects of a situation.



Personalization
Thinking which assumes one has been intentionally excluded or targeted.

Challenge Your Thoughts

When thinking this...	Try this instead...
I never do anything right.	That isn't true. I do get things right.
I feel like doing 'x' so I should go do it right now.	I can take time to process my thoughts without reacting first.
I have no control over my reactions.	I can learn to control how I react.
My emotions are who I am.	My emotions are my brain processing info.
Everything will end badly.	What if things work out?
All I do is mess up.	What would my friends tell me?



Coping Strategies Toolkit

Emotion-Focused Coping Skills



- Essential for situations that cannot be changed
- Distress tolerance
- Emotion regulation
- Stress management

Problem-Focused Coping Skills

- Essential for situations that can be changed
- Teaches problem solving skills
- Empowers youth

Q&A



Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988** or **1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **ParentGuidance.Org**
<https://parentguidance.org/>
Welcome - parentguidance.org
We offer education and therapeutic support to empower and give you hope as you support your child's mental health.
- **Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego, Educational Resource Library**
<https://www.rchsd.org/programs-services/behavioral-health/education/>
- **National Parent Helpline**
<https://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/>
We provide vital information, support, and referrals through calls, texts, and chats to diverse parents, children, and youth seeking help nationwide. The National Parent & Youth Helpline™ is operated by Parents Anonymous® and available 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- **Mental Health America**
<https://mhanational.org/mental-health-resources-parents>
Find resources on caregiving as a parent - whether caring for children or your own parents.
- **San Diego County Office of Education**
<https://www.sdcoe.net/students/health-well-being/mental-health-supports>
Prioritizing mental health is important for students to be able to learn effectively; it's also a key component that helps staff teach and support learners every day. The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) has compiled resources and information for students, families, and schools that keep mental health supports top of mind.
- **Soluna App**
<https://solunaapp.com/>
Confidential support for 13- to 25-year-olds in California. No cost. No pressure. Chat 1:1 with a professional coach, use interactive tools to destress, or explore quizzes, videos, forums, and more.

San Diego County Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988** or **1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **San Diego County Access and Crisis Line.** Call: **888-724-7240**. Crisis counseling or referrals, 24 hours a day/7 days a week.
- **Rady Children's Behavioral Health Urgent Care (BHUC) Walk-in Clinic.** Call: **858-966-5484**. 4 p.m.-8 p.m., Mon- Fri. 4305 University Avenue, Suite 150, San Diego, CA 92105. Serves youth ages 5-21 struggling with concerns that pose an imminent risk to their safety, the safety of others, or significantly impair their daily lives.
- **Rady Children's Hospital Emergency Room.** Call: **858-966-8005**. 3020 Children's Way, 1st Floor, San Diego, CA 92123.
- **San Diego County Emergency Screening Unit.** Call: **619-876-4502**. 4309 3rd Avenue, San Diego, CA 92103. Available to children and adolescents for emergency psychiatric assistance.
- **Center for Community Solutions.** Call: **888-385-4657**
- **Crisis Action and Connection.** Call: **619-591-5740**
- **North County Crisis Intervention and Response Team.** Mon-Fri from 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Weekends from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Escondido, call: **760-233-0133** | Vista, call: **760-305-8225**.
- **2-1-1 San Diego:** Dial **2-1-1** from a mobile or **858-300-211** from any phone

California & National Resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** Call: **988** or **1-800-273-TALK**; Spanish line: **888-628-9454**; TTY: **800-799-4TTY** (4889) (8255). You'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7.
- **California Coalition for Youth Crisis Line.** Call/text: **1-800-843-5200**. Available 24 hours/7 days a week. Languages other than English are available. Anonymous and confidential for youth and TAY struggling with behavioral issues. Provides local community resources for you and your family. Text and live chat available from 4:30pm-8:30pm daily via website **www.calyouth.org** or phone.
- **California Peer-Run Warm Line:** Call: **855-845-7415**. 24/7 non-emergency emotional support and referrals.
- **Crisis Text Line.** National crisis text line. Text the word "HOME" to **741-741 24/7**.
- **LGBT National Youth Talkline.** Call: **800-246-7743**. Monday to Friday from 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline.** Call: **800-656-HOPE** (4673).
- **Teen Line.** Call: **800-852-8336**. 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. PST or text TEEN to **839863**.
- **Trevor Project Lifeline.** Call: **866-488-7386**. Text: Text the word "Trevor" to **202-304-1200**. 24-hour hotline that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning young people (LGBTQ) ages 13-24. **www.thetrevorproject.org**.
- **Trans Lifeline.** Call: **1-877-565-8860**. Crisis hotline staffed by transgender people for transgender people. **www.translifeline.org**
- **Veterans Crisis Line.** Call: **(800)-273-8255** Press 1. 24 hours a day, 7 days/week. The Veterans Crisis Line is a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) resource that connects Veterans in crisis or their families and friends with qualified, caring VA professionals. Confidential support is available.
- **Soluna App**
<https://solunaapp.com/>
Confidential support for 13- to 25-year-olds in California. No cost. No pressure. Chat 1:1 with a professional coach, use interactive tools to destress, or explore quizzes, videos, forums, and more.