

# Strength-Based Resilience Strategies for Youth

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Emily Geier, MSSA, LISW-S  
Shaker Heights Youth Center  
Shaker Heights Middle School  
[geier\\_e@shaker.org](mailto:geier_e@shaker.org)

# Background and introduction

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- Why this work, why this topic?
- Movement maker instead of icebreaker: Let's Stretch!
- Andrew Huberman PhD - Cyclic sighing demonstration

Cyclic Breathing For Beginners: Guided Breathwork by Andrew Huberman

# Target goals for this session

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- Reinforce need for professional self-awareness re: cultural competency & anti-bias
- Define strength-based philosophy
- Differentiate trauma vs. other forms of stress and painful events
- Enhance understanding of healthy stress and true hallmarks of mental health
- Define resilience conceptually, experientially, and in practice
- Explore pertinent research
- Review effective resilience strategies as a group

# Defining strength-based work

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AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BUILDING must be at the core of our work, radiating out to families and other systems interacting with the youth.

- Calling resilience strategies strength-based is redundant
- Strength-based focus  $\neq$  deficit mindset, which focuses on weaknesses, outward “behaviors” and negative labeling.
- Predictability and emotional safety are crucial hallmarks of authentic relationship building.  
Showing up as secure, safe and always in their corner

- Essential therapeutic tools:
  - self-knowledge
  - awareness of motivations
  - cultural competency
  - mindful practice
- Barriers to authentic engagement created by bias and lack of cultural understanding
- Remaining mindful of positional power



# Strength areas to assess for in our youth

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- Internal character traits, (i.e. kindness, perseverance, curiosity, humor, honesty, fairness)
- Known capabilities
- Unacknowledged capabilities
- Self-awareness
- Resourcefulness
- Markers of autonomy and independence
- Self-regulation
- External support systems

# Expected outcomes

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Research at the VIA institute shows that resilience and post-traumatic growth correspond with the following strengths:

- Improved relationships (kindness, love)
- Openness to new possibilities (curiosity, creativity, love of learning)
- Appreciation of life (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, zest)
- Personal strength (bravery, honesty, perseverance)
- Spiritual development (spirituality)



# Differentiating trauma from manageable stress and discomfort

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## Dr. Paul Conti

- Trauma is a response in mind and body that overwhelms our system; a force that distorts our “map of life” making it more difficult to navigate through challenging circumstances.
- It often produces cognitive distortions, especially extreme negativity bias. There are no shortcuts to healing, which requires deep listening and forging authentic connections. “Trauma changes our emotions; changed emotions determine our decisions”.

## Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris

- ACE's - Regarding trauma and toxic stress, shifting the way we work with people is the key to a healthy, healing journey. Even though adverse childhood experiences can lead to a prolonged activation of the body's stress response, ACE's are not destiny.

## Dr. Judith Herman

- When a real or perceived threat overwhelms the body's natural ability to protect and/or defend itself

# Three R's of Trauma Resolution support – from Growing Resilience Ohio

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Encompasses expressive and sensory treatment:

- Re-Experiencing – empathetic connection helping them elucidate experiences that matter
- Releasing – honoring their survival strategies helps reveal resilience; enhances dignity
- Re-Organizing – awareness of trauma impacts and insights allows for the freedom to remove it from the center of existence/creating the life one wants and opening up possibilities to contribute meaningfully



# Differentiating trauma from manageable stress and discomfort

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Lisa Damour

- teens (and adults) need to understand that mental health isn't about "feeling good" but about having feelings that fit the moment, even if those feelings are unwanted or painful. "You will experience stress under any conditions that require adaptation or circumstances that lead to growth"
- the pitfalls of the "wellness industrial complex" ...that we are supposed to be striving for happiness, serenity and self-satisfaction at all times.

Alia Crum, PhD

- research demonstrating "stress is enhancing", especially if we understand our core assumptions about the nature of stress itself. Most people have the mindset that stressful situations are inherently debilitating, which is a simplified and one sided assumption. There's another side of stress that reveals to us that the body's stress response, the mind's stress response, was not designed to be debilitating, but instead designed to help us elevate our performance and behavior to meet the demands we're facing. Stress can help you rise to a new level of understanding, can deepen your connection with others, can make us even physiologically grow tougher and stronger. Having that focus shifts our attention and behaviors in ways that make that mindset more true.

# Differentiating trauma from manageable stress and discomfort

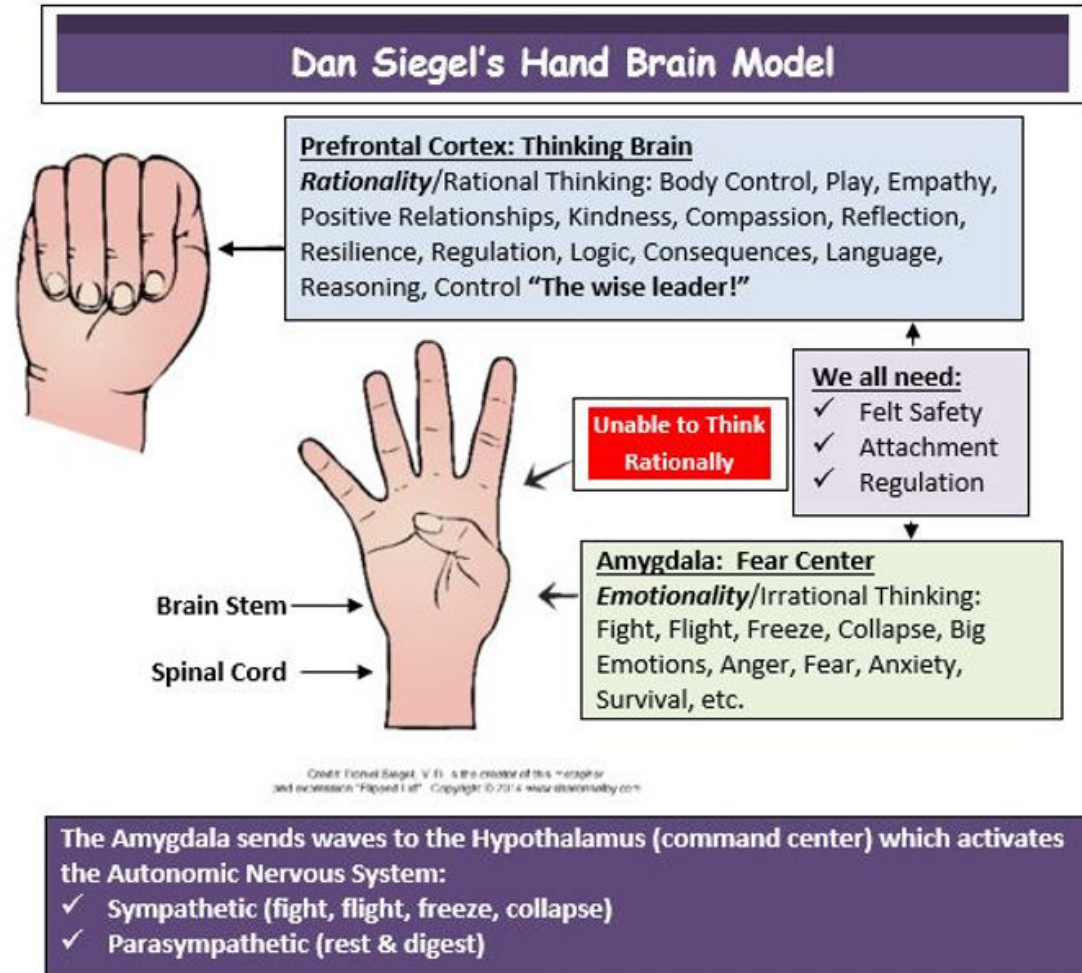
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## Dr. Samantha Boardman

- “From Stress to Strength”
- Doing something worthwhile will often make us feel stressed, nervous and even overwhelmed. It is typical and we need messages that normalize withstanding the discomfort and reinforce that we will grow from being pushed (not over our limit, but outside the comfort edge)
- It is our PERCEPTION of what these emotions mean that can allow us to adapt toward motivation. (e.g. Bruce Springsteen - I’m ready to rock!)
- This enormous capacity that humans have for resilience is by definition STRENGTH-BASED, but some people have not had the opportunity to have their strengths illuminated
- It is not a trait, but a muscle you can strengthen through deliberate, effortful action, aided by personal and systemic supports
- “Behavior activation” - your actions and behaviors will shape how you feel, rather than your thoughts determining your actions. We shift our emotional state through behavior activations, i.e. taking a walk, helping others, writing in a journal, exercising, meditating, dancing, calling a friend Helping people get specific with their language, expanding their emotional vocabulary actually shifts their feeling of efficacy and agency (emotions co-mingle)
- Not about “toxic positivity”, which was promoted by the well-being industrial complex and ends up contributing to insecurity and self-loathing
- The ultimate key is Connection and Support - Our job is primarily authentic relationship building, which includes collaborating with our clients or students to help their voice and agency flourish through embracing challenges.
- Not only encouraging self-care, but also avenues to care for others

# What do we expect of the adolescent brain?

Because adolescents feel their emotions more intensely, their emotions are triggered more easily, and it takes them longer to return to baseline. Hence, it can look like an unresilient presentation, but is actually normal brain development. They are also primed at this stage to learn and integrate knowledge.



# Trauma Informed Support – Dr. Bruce Perry

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1. Create Safety
2. Regulate the Nervous System
3. Connect
4. Support a Coherent Narrative
5. Practice "Power-With" Strategies
6. Build Skills of Social and Emotional Resilience
7. Foster Post-Traumatic Growth

# Question for discussion

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What makes us see stress so negatively, or become paralyzed by it?



# Defining resilience – different definitions/same themes

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- Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity, failure or disappointment
- The ability to adapt to changes or circumstances out of our control without remaining in a state of upheaval
- Coping with negative life events and recovering without allowing them to define who we are
- Adaptation following adversity

- Not the absence of suffering or trauma, but the ability to move through it and find meaning again
- American Academy of Pediatrics – The 7 C's of Resilience

Confidence, Competence, Connection, Character, Contribution, Coping, Control

- <https://parentandteen.com/building-resilience-in-teens/>



# Resiliency Ohio

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“Resiliency is an inner capacity that when nurtured, facilitated, and supported by others—empowers children, youth, and families to successfully meet life’s challenges with a sense of self-determination, mastery and hope”

[Their website offers a clearinghouse of resources.](#)



# Growing Resilience Ohio program

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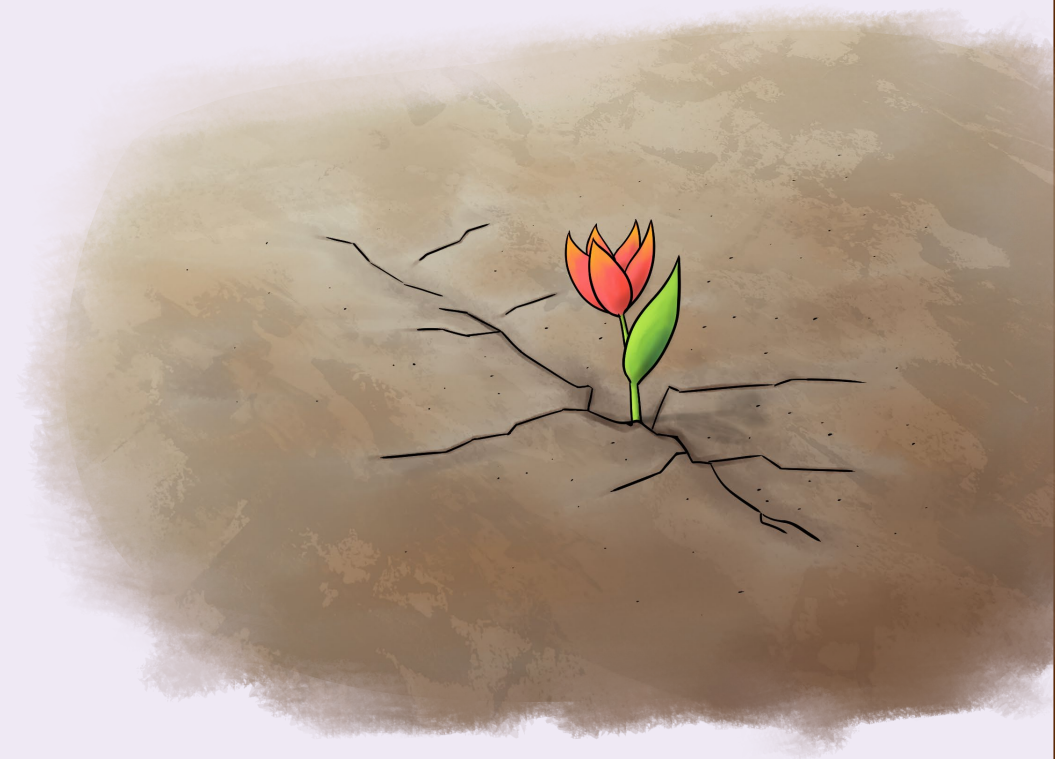
- The Resilience Project / Sarah Buffie and Mary Vicario
- Top 5 resilience factors according to research meta-analysis:
  1. Connection with safe, positive adults
  2. Belonging and Affiliation
  3. External Supports
  4. Self-esteem (Resenberg's scale)
  5. Agency

# Ann Marsten

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“The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability or healthy development”

Resilience research has overturned many assumptions and deficit-focused models. Turns out resilience is ordinary, but is threatened when protective systems are compromised. Individual resilience depends on resilience of other systems with whom they interact and depend.



# Judith Herman

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“Recovery can only take place in the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation”

List of Protective Factors:

- Capable caregiving
- Other close relationships
- Problem solving skills
- Self-regulation skills
- Motivation to succeed
- Self-efficacy
- Faith, hope or belief that life has meaning
- Effective schools
- Well-functioning communities



# Prentis Hemphill – Embodied Resilience

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“Resilience is our birthright to be Generative, Creative, Adaptive and Relational - not an acclimation to conditions, but a commitment to life through practices that restore these pillars”

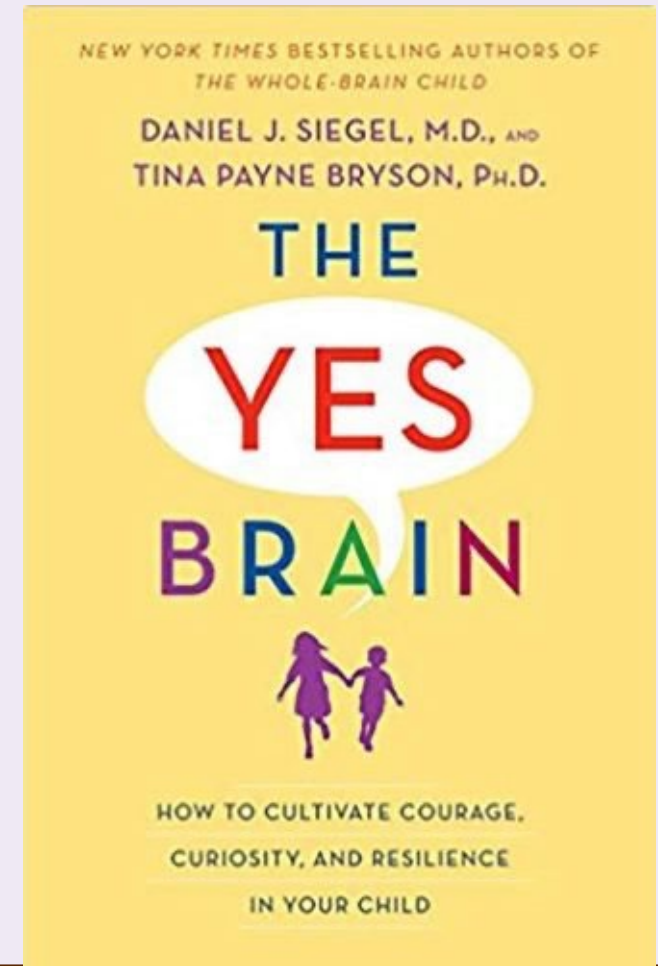
- Resilience is distinct from survival
- A collective practice dissociating resilience from pain and trauma, allowing for a sense of possibility and agency to join the flow of life
- Helping justice movements organize around these concepts



# Dr. Dan Siegel

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- Yes Brain is when a child feels seen and heard by their caregivers
- Providing a validating response, honoring the emotion, thought or impulse, then followed by the boundary or structure that the caregiver needs to impart
- Resilience does not require intentional tough love and harshness in order to prepare them for the world. The idea that instilling fear or exerting physical control will teach healthy boundaries ends up creating an insecure fragmented mind. Rather, it's a secure attachment forged through a predictable, safe connection that actually allows a disciplined mind to flourish.





# Andrew Huberman, PhD.

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Growth mindset (growth is possible through meaningful effort), plus “stress is enhancing” mindset (e.g. Crum) - together have a synergistic effect in terms of neuroplasticity, motivation and sense of well-being

# Paul Conti

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We need adversity to build resilience, but it is not true that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The trauma that doesn't kill us can make us weaker in all sorts of ways, even generationally. Post-trauma growth and resilience require us to shine light on the guilt and shame and anxiety that keeps trauma festering inside us like an abscess. And then the time to reorient and open ourselves to the help ***only other people can provide.***



# 5 Domains of Post-Traumatic Growth

**1** Shift: Doubt ("Why?") towards Optimism ("I Can")

- A greater feeling of self-reliance
- Recognition of ability to handle challenges
- Increased sense of capacities to survive and prevail
- Ability to better accept the way things work out
- A discovery of being stronger than one thought

< Growth

**2** Shift: Distant ("I dread interactions") towards Intimate ("interactions warm my heart")

- More openness to count on people in times of trouble and acceptance of needing others
- A greater sense of closeness with others
- More comfortable with intimacy & vulnerability
- Increased sense of compassion for others suffering
- More effort into relationships

< Growth

**3** Shift: Resentment ("Why me?") towards Gratitude ("I'm thankful")

- Changed sense of priorities about what's important
- A greater appreciation for the value of own life, each day, relations and what one still has
- Increase in the importance of "little things" or things formerly taken for granted
- Gratitude comes with more presence & mindfulness

< Growth

**4** Shift: Survivor ("I get by") towards Thriver ("I dream")

- Recognition of availability of new opportunities
- More likelihood to change things that need changing
- Willingness to explore opportunities (new interests and vocational paths) never before considered
- Acceptance of the breakage and becoming more resilient and open to new ways of living

< Growth

**5** Shift: Hopelessness ("No way") towards Contentment ("I accept")

- Life is experienced at a deeper level of awareness
- Development of a deeper sense of real spirituality
- After an existential quest, life beliefs & philosophies tend to be fully developed, satisfying & meaningful
- For the ascetics, there can be growth experienced through engagement in greater cognitive existential questions

< Growth



Adapted from Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun

**Paradox:** At a time when one is vulnerable as never before, there is a sense of strength

Testimonials >

- "If I handled this then I can handle just about anything"
- "Things that used to be big deals aren't big deals to me anymore"
- "Big problems will either work out or not. Whichever way, you have to deal with it"

**Paradox:** Some deeper & meaningful relationships form while losing or weakening others

Testimonials >

- "I cherish my husband a lot more"
- "You find out who your real friends are in a situation like this"
- "I've become more empathetic towards anybody in pain and anybody in any kind of grief"

**Paradox:** What can break us open can also open us more to life

Testimonials >

- "Even the smallest joys in life took on a special meaning. I take time to stop & smell the roses."
- "A child's smile and spending time with a toddler is more important than anything else"
- "Painful circumstances taught me the biggest lessons"

**Paradox:** Out of loss there can be gain

Testimonials >

- "It changed my life physically, emotionally, and mentally - every aspect of my life changed"
- "In the beginning I thought it changed my life for the worst, but it changed for better"
- "Compassion has opened up new doors to provide care and comfort to others"

**Paradox:** Out of spiritual doubt there can emerge a deeper faith

Testimonials >

- "I don't know what I would do without Him now"
- "We are not alone"
- "There has been no doubt in my mind that there is a greater hand at work. My faith in God led me to have faith in myself"



# Focus questions for discussion

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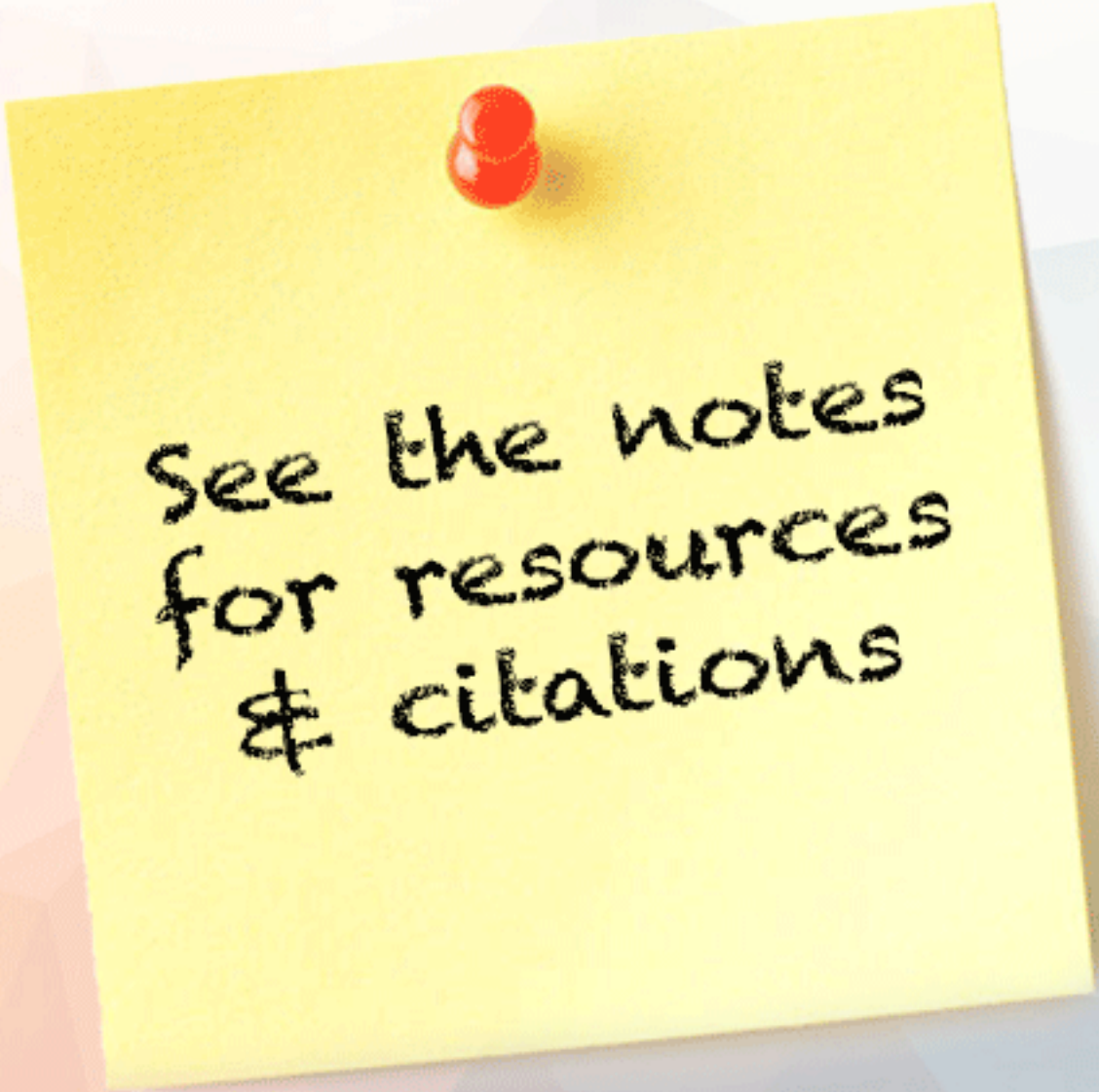
- What would we like to see happen systemically in youth work that would further enhance resilience?
- Discuss and record specific ways that our particular professional communities could be enhanced from the perspective of a strength-based mindset.



# Examples of resilience building activities

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- Calming glitter jar
- Worry Box with coping skills lid
- Metaphor brainstorming
- Walking and Talking
- Gardening projects
- Gratitude post-its on door
- Coffee House readings
- Strength-focused journaling
- Three Good Things exercise from VIA
- Rose, Bud, Thorn journaling
- WOOP Mental Contrasting exercises (Panorama)
- Dan Siegel's Hand Brain Model
- Struggle Strategies worksheet
- Nature Hikes
- Greater Good Institute Cyclic breathing



See the notes  
for resources  
& citations