

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN DIRECT CARE STAFF

SKILLS TO ALLEVIATE SYMPTOMS OF
SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

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Why Focus on Resilience?

Research shows that people who build their resiliency feel less overwhelmed by the stress of caring for youth who have experienced trauma. Resilient people still experience stress, but they are able to recover more quickly and with less cost to their well-being. And more resilient staff lead to more resilient and trauma-informed communities.

This Guide

In this guide, you'll find a collection of Resiliency Building skills from Lionheart's EQ2 Program, a trauma-informed, self-regulation program designed for direct-care staff, including:



**FLIP
THE
SWITCH**



MINDFULNESS



CONNECT

LIGHTEN UP



**RECHARGE
AND RECOVER**



**LIGHTEN
THE
LOAD**

As you go through each one, think about how you might try these skills with your staff or coworkers!

[Click here to learn
more about EQ2!](#)

Resiliency Practice: Flip the Switch

At the end of each EQ2 session, there will be a section on how to build your resiliency. **Research shows that people who build their resiliency feel less overwhelmed by the stress of caring for youth who have experienced trauma.** Resilient people still experience stress, but they are able to recover more quickly and with less cost to their well-being.

Flip The Switch... (or... Look for the Positive)

It's easy to focus on what isn't working at work. Not enough resources, more and more challenging youth... In fact our brain has a natural tendency to do this. **It's called the negativity bias.** But there are things we can do to shift this negativity bias in the other direction to feel happier and less stressed. Flipping the switch from what's wrong to what's right powerfully changes our world view...but only if we do it!



HERE ARE SOME STEPS TO FLEXING OUR POSITIVITY MUSCLE.

- **Shift your thinking.** Cool Thoughts help us flip the switch by reframing situations. “Why can’t this kid follow directions?!?” Becomes, “he’s been through a lot. It’s amazing he’s doing as well as he is.” Flip the switch and feel your stress level decrease almost instantly.
- **See the growth.** Focus on the **progress** youth are making (no matter how slow) instead of the behaviors that are challenging or frustrating.
- **Catch yourself early in the negativity cycle.** We’re human and this work can be hard. But the **minute** you notice negativity creeping in...flip the switch!
- **Say it.** Start the next staff meeting by doing a Praise Circle. Say one positive thing about the person on your right. Or something that went right this week.
- **Reflect on the positive.** At the end of your shift, (or the end of your day) reflect on all the positive experiences you had no matter how small. It could be having your relief staff show up on time, getting a little good news, or finding \$10 in your coat. Lock in the feeling for as long as you can.

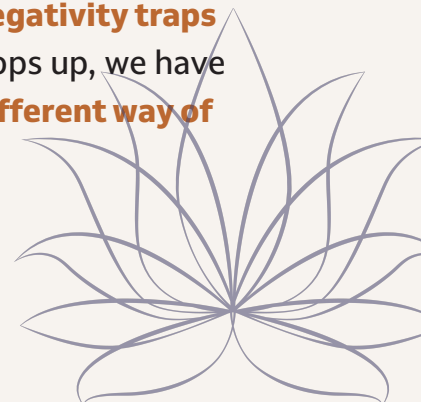
Resiliency Practice: Mindfulness

There is no single way to practice mindfulness. You can eat mindfully, walk mindfully, listen to music mindfully, and even shower mindfully. **Mindfulness meditation has been shown to reduce depression, anxiety, and help with overeating.** Its powers sound magical, but it's actually very simple.

Basically, mindfulness means **paying full attention to what is going on in the present moment** without getting swept away by the thoughts, judgments or emotions that play a constant soundtrack in our heads. As we become more aware of our thoughts, we stop being ruled by them. We see them for what they are: thoughts... not facts. **Mindfulness meditation helps drop an anchor that steadies us even in the roughest water.**

HERE ARE SOME MEDITATION TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED...

- **Some is better than none:** It would be great if we all meditated for an hour a day. But the truth is that meditating a little bit is a lot better than not meditating at all. If you can only do 2 minutes a day, that's fantastic and much better than skipping it altogether. That said, the more the better.
- **Emergency mindfulness:** If you've used **Stop, Breathe, and Choose, you've used mindfulness.** Although you're not sitting with your eyes closed, you are stopping and making more aware choices about how to respond to a situation. You are stopping yourself from getting hijacked. That IS mindfulness.
- **Same time, same place:** Like with any habit, it's more likely to stick if you make it part of your routine. Pick a time and a place and like the Nike ad says, *Just Do It.*
- **Stay Out of Dark Alleys:** If your loved one said they planned to walk down a dark alley at night all alone, you'd urge them not to do it. It could be dangerous! They could get hurt! But our minds go down alleys filled with negativity and danger all the time. What meditation helps us do is become aware of these **negativity traps** and choose to turn away. The instant a negative or toxic thought pops up, we have the choice to cling to it or let it go. Meditation helps us **choose a different way of seeing.** And that is where our freedom is.



Resiliency Practice: Connect

Just as building positive relationships with youth helps them become resilient and heal from past trauma, supportive relationships with our co-workers *strengthen and protect us*.

Research shows that high quality connections at work are one of the most powerful ways to **prevent burnout and secondary trauma**. Most of us already know the value of positive work relationships to ease stress. The tips below offer some additional strategies for building a healthy work environment that brings everyone into the fold.



TIPS FOR BUILDING CONNECTIONS AT WORK

- **Tend the flock** – When you see someone struggling, step in. Some of us have our **own histories of trauma** which can get played out in terms of how we connect and relate to others. We might **withdraw** when we feel hurt or embarrassed. Or we might be **overly sensitive to feedback or criticism**. Sometimes small acts of kindness and inclusion can deeply impact someone's well-being. And if someone does this for you ...**intentionally pay it forward**.
- **Drop the Drama** – Positive, healthy relationships give us strength. **Gossip, scapegoating, and judgment create toxic environments** that increase burnout and stress. In the next staff meeting, challenge yourself to see something you have in common with or like about a staff member who typically annoys you.
- **Use the Platinum Rule** – Instead of treating people how **WE** want to be treated, **treat others how THEY would like to be treated**.
- **Fix problems when they're small** – Manage conflict before it spins out of control. In this line of work, many opportunities for conflict arise such as staff showing up late for their shift or not passing on critical information about a youth before they leave. The sooner you address these issues, the less likely they are to fester or explode. **Once a conflict has been settled, let it go and Move On... Be the grown up!**

Resiliency Practice: Lighten Up

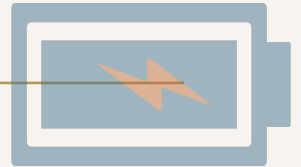
Helping trauma-exposed youth learn to manage their emotions and behaviors can weigh us down.

We may not think of joy and humor as part of the antidote to caregiver fatigue, but research shows it can be. In terms of human biology, joy and happiness are the *opposite emotions* of fear and sadness—the emotions that mark the life experiences of most traumatized children. Healing youth requires us to lighten up. And it's part of caring for ourselves as we do this work.



- **Know where you're starting from** – Do you remember your caregivers smiling and laughing when you were a kid? Did folks mostly walk around with a scowl on their faces? If so, happiness might feel uncomfortable. Or it might feel unprofessional. Or you might fear that “lightening up” will mean losing control. Just start by observing your thoughts about humor, joy, and happiness without judging yourself. Rate yourself on how comfortable you are expressing positive feelings.
- **Fix Your Face** – We talk a lot about being aware of our expressions because they can send powerful messages to youth. But fixing our faces can actually change how we feel. Researchers call this “facial feedback theory,” meaning our expressions influence our moods. The next time you find yourself feeling stressed, irritated, or just blahhh, try smiling for 5 seconds and taking a deep breath.
- **Assign someone to lead people through a fun, dumb game or Circle at your next staff meeting.** Examples are...
 - **2 Truths and a Lie** (look it up online).
 - **Choose A Circle from Circles to Lighten Things Up** in the Section 1 Supplemental Material like... **What would you choose for your “last meal?”**
- **Pull in youth.** Most youth who have grown up in traumatic environments have not seen a lot of **gentle humor**. The “humor” they’ve seen was often meant to mock or put them down. **But kind humor heals.** Not only does laughing and experiencing positive emotions help youth, the mirror neurons in our brains let their joy lift us up too. (Try watching a funny movie, playing a game, doing a Lighten Up Circle, talent show, dance contest).

Resiliency Practice: Recharge and Recover Away from Work



Being an **Emotion Coach** requires enormous patience and ongoing compassion. In order to keep showing up in an intentionally good way, we need to actively recharge our batteries.

Recovering can mean finding **relaxation through cooking, art, friends, exercise or worship** or anything else that recharges and restores you. The important thing is that you actually **DO IT**.

- **Don't let the needle hit Empty.** Many of us in this profession ignore the light telling us we're getting low on gas. We wait until we're running on fumes. If you need to refuel, do it before you're stranded at night in the desert with nothing but a stale granola bar under the seat to eat.
- **Be "Selfish."** Most of us come to this work because we are natural caregivers. So it's strange that we give so little care to ourselves. But the most important tool we bring to this work is ourSelves with a capital "S." Surgeons use their scalpels and fire fighters have hoses. The impact of our work depends on how much of our calm, compassionate, patient Self shows up every day.
- **Don't deny climate change.** The always changing "difficulty factor" within residential settings and caseloads is REAL. If you are in a challenging cycle at work (more deeply traumatized youth, short on staff), you will need to be more intentional about recharging at home.
- **Do something memorable once a month.** It's natural to want to space out in front of the TV after a long day. These ways of relaxing can all blur together. But, a day spent doing something really out of the ordinary like going to a concert, hiking with friends, or heading to the beach will stand out as a "star moment" and add an extra charge to the battery.
- **Bring your personal life to work.** Not literally. But recalling a particularly pleasant, relaxing, or comforting experience you had away from work while going through your busy hectic work day can help our stress level go down. Science is showing that imagining an activity or pleasant event fires the same parts of our brains as when we do those activities in real life....giving us a double bang for our buck.

Resiliency Practice: Lighten the Load



Working with trauma-impacted youth can feel like a “heavy-lift” at times. We are asked to stay calm and grounded in the face of challenging emotions and behavior. We bear witness to the pain trauma has created. That’s why it’s important to **lighten our load every day** to build our resilience against burnout and secondary trauma.

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO TRY OUT...

- **Take microbreaks** – Close your eyes for a moment or shift your attention to the farthest visual point you can see while repeating a calming phrase, Cool Thought or prayer.
- **Breathe** – Stanford scientists have proven what most of us know...breathing helps. They discovered what they call the “breathing pacemaker” – 3,000 neurons in the brain that help our bodies calm down just by breathing deeply. During moments of stress or as a way to relax during the day, take three or four deep breaths and notice the changes you feel.
- **Mindfully use your senses** – Take time to really taste your lunch. Do some simple stretching. Listen to a song that helps you reset or look at a picture of someone or something you love and release some positive endorphins.
- **Look ahead** – Think ahead to a simple pleasure that you can enjoy at the end of your day. (yes...this includes binge watching...)
- **Get out** – A proven way to reset your stress meter is to change your surroundings even for a moment. This is especially true if you can get outside. Feel the sun or wind on your face. Take a brisk walk and come back refreshed and recharged.
- **Ask for help** – Gently check in with yourself and see what keeps you from asking for help. Pride? Fear of looking weak? In order to do this job effectively, we all need help.

These Resiliency Practices only work if you **keep practicing them! We can't give what we don't have. This job requires us to take care of ourselves so we can take care of others! **You matter!** And...**

THE YOUTH NEED THE BEST YOU THERE IS!