Lessons in Spiritual Resiliency for Comprehensive Airman Fitness

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These lessons in Spiritual Resiliency are
dedicated to Gregg Thomas Bushman.

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for Comprehensive Airman Fitness

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Introduction

The spiritual domain of the Air Force Comprehensive Airman Fitness Model is provided as part of an equal balance approach to the four domains of wellness and resiliency: mental, physical, social, and spiritual. However, the spiritual domain has the least amount of explanation, and the definitions and tenets therein certainly read like Air Force literature. It would seem that there is no "spirit" in the spiritual domain.

Purpose

These lesson plans seek to strengthen the resources available and offers lessons on three topics related to spiritual resiliency, finding meaning, building community, and using positive coping mechanisms. These lessons will follow the paradigm of Air Force education and instruction as set forth in Air Force Manual 33-2263 the "Guidebook for Air Force Instructors." These specific lessons were chosen because they set a groundwork for increasing spiritual resiliency, and they are among a list of other possible topics that can be expounded in the future. The Air Force is specific on using behavior-centered outcomes that are practical and discernable as set forth by well written objectives and lesson plans.

The Air Force offers training at all levels of rank and command. These lessons are tailored for an Air Force audience that is young and in the process of developing resiliency in the domains of wellness. It can also be for those who may be more mature, such as leaders, but are seeking greater resiliency because of some event, or possible event, that may be creating dissonance in their lives. The material is also flexible enough that anyone who is engaged and committed to increasing their spiritual resiliency can participate. This includes all Airmen, Air Force personnel, and families that are concerned with improving the culture of resiliency in the Air Force (or even the other branches of the military.) These lessons are primarily to be taught before trauma takes place. Since there is no way to know when that may occur, it is important to start now to implement at least some, if not all of the materials, ideas, and suggestions herein.

The lessons are to be taught in a setting that allows for discussion. The instructor is to direct the conversation, and to provide the means necessary to continue the discussion through knowledge on the subject matter and engagement with the students. The lessons should not be taught in lecture format. They should be interactive, and the activities should be immediately applicable to the lives of the Airmen being taught. Bloom's cognitive taxonomy is the most significant model used in Air

Force instructional design. That being said, the majority of the focus for most Air Force instruction is within the lowest three tiers of Bloom's taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, and application. As these lessons seek to increase comprehension on the selected topics and are meant to be applicable, these tiers should be the greatest concern and focus for the instructor.

Possible prompts and questions in the first three tiers of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy as related to the topics of finding meaning, building community, and using positive coping strategies are illustrated as follows:

	Finding Meaning
Knowledge	Define meaning according to: -The Air Force -Society -Personal Meaning
Comprehension	Think of an individual that you know that seems to understand their meaning. What is their story and what is their meaning?
Application	What are your goals for today? This week? This year? The next ten years? Over your career? How can you make today's goals work toward your career goals?

	Building Community
Knowledge	List a number of groups that you consider a community.
Comprehension	What are the ideal factors that you would consider if you were to build your own community?
Application	What are ways that you can reach out to members of your community as a positive voice and presence?

	Using Positive Coping Mechanisms
Knowledge	Identify among a list of possible coping mechanisms, those that are positive coping mechanisms.
Comprehension	Given possible scenarios, what coping mechanisms were utilized? What are some other positive coping mechanisms that could have been utilized?
Application	Think of one habit or harmful coping mechanism that you have. What can you do to overcome it, and what positive coping mechanism can you start to develop to take its place?

Implementation

The intended audience for these lessons can be reached in a number of ways. Air Force training mandates that Airmen are offered yearly training. This training can come in the form of Commander's calls, Airmen training days, or within the time allotted for specialty training and upkeep. These are the times best suited for non-chaplains to engage in instruction on the domains of wellness, to include the spiritual domain. In addition, because the materials in these lessons focus on the "taboo" subjects of spirituality and religiosity, these lessons can also be taught in voluntary "spiritual work out groups" and offered as incentive training that could be included in an Enlisted Performance Review, or other such documented evaluation. The lessons are intended to be one hour each week, or adjusted as necessary.

Summary

These lessons do not seek to undermine the culture of the Air Force, or to highlight or promote any religious or spiritual preference over another. They are to enforce and enlarge individual resiliency so that the resiliency of the community as a whole is affected. Each Airman serves as a vital component to the Air Force, and the individual worth of each Airman is invaluable. Airmen are the greatest asset in the United States Air Force inventory, and individual success only assures greater overall mission success. Thus, the need for holistic resiliency, specifically the need for lessons which would increase spiritual resiliency and wellness in each Airman.

Lessons in Spiritual Resiliency for Comprehensive Airman Fitness

Lesson 1

Finding Meaning

Instructor_____

For small group instruction (2-20 class members)
Use guided discussion in presentation of materials

Objective –

Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to comprehend what is meant by "meaning."

Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will create a personal definition of "meaning."

Step 3. TEST ITEM: Define "meaning" in your own words and describe what you perceive your "meaning" in life to be.

By the end of the lesson, class members should be able to answer or complete the following questions and prompts-

Knowledge Level: Define meaning according to:
            -The Air Force
            -Society
            -Your Personal Meaning

Comprehension Level: Think of an individual that you know that seems
            to understand their meaning. What is their story and
            what is their meaning?

Application Level: What are your goals for today?
            This week?
            This year?
            The next ten years?
            Over your career?
            How can you make today's goals work toward your
            career goals?

Class members need access to Finding Meaning Chapter 1

Lesson Outline

Key Words **–Purpose, Self-Concept, Values Clarification, Meaning, Self-Reflection, Self-Evaluation, Moral Compass, Purpose, Self-Narrative, Altruism (Other Centered-Service), Current Pursuits, Self-Actualization**

Introduction-

Begin the first lesson with the students and the instructor introducing themselves. This can be done with a simple icebreaker such as passing a ball between class members who then introduce themselves as the ball reaches them. (Or something similar.)

Provide expectations of attendance, and responsibilities of class members (as per unit guidelines, if any.)

Address safety precautions such as evacuation locations (as per unit guidelines, if any.)

State the objective as outlined on the cover page of the lesson.

> Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to comprehend what is meant by "meaning."

> Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will create a personal definition of "meaning."

> Step 3. TEST ITEM: Define "meaning" in your own words and describe what you perceive your "meaning" in life to be.

Discuss the key words in the chapter and ask class members if they have any *background knowledge* on the key words or the subject of the lesson.

Present the lesson. This should be done in discussion format. It should not be read word for word, but certain portions can and should be read as appropriate.

Allow students the opportunity to ask questions or to present their favorite (or least favorite parts of the material.)

Finding Meaning Chapter 1

Self-Concept

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference."[1]

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1 Frost, "The Road Not Taken," 105.

Part 1: Cover Sheet

Notes:

When Robert Frost penned the words to his poem "The Road Not Taken," perhaps he did not know the impact that it would have for thousands, if not millions of people as they pondered and wondered at the decisions in life that had led them to their current situations. It is our decisions, actions, and thoughts that make us who we are, "we act like the people we conceive ourselves to be. In fact, it is difficult to act otherwise even with conscious effort and willpower."[2] Who we conceive ourselves to be may be different than others perceive us to be, or it might be right on the mark. However, once established, it takes effort to change the picture of ourselves that we have created. This picture, "provides a screen through which everything else is seen, heard, evaluated, and understood."[3] When people respond to the way that we are, it is often in conjunction with our self-concepts. "if the self-concept is generally positive, it engenders self-respect and confidence, while a generally negative self-concept leads to feelings of inadequacy and a lack of confidence."[4]

Another way to look at the self-concept is to think of it as a "theory we have about ourselves."[5] We collect data based on our behavior and on others' reactions to our actions and we make inferences about our behavior and these reactions. We test our theory and constantly change it based on our observations. "Our self-theory affects our behavior; our behavior in turn affects our self-theory—a theory continually being tested and revised."[6]

Values Clarification

At times we feel dissonance between what we perceive ourselves to be and what we perceive others to think of us. This dissonance is perhaps a good time to reengage the theories that we have about ourselves by focusing on a values clarification. This clarification helps, "people become aware of and clarify what their lives are for and what is worth working for."[7] What are our lives for? What are we placing value and worth on? What are we working for?

Meaning

These are some of the questions that surround the search for meaning. Many may be familiar with Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which asks similar questions and posits that it is this quest for meaning, the very pursuit thereof that drives humanity forward. We have meaning, but many do not know what their individual meaning may be, and that is what subconsciously drives them forward: the search for meaning. "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not

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2 AFMAN 36-2236 31.2, 361.
3 AFMAN 36-2236 31.2.1, 361.
4 AFMAN 36-2236 31.2.1, 361.
5 AFMAN 36-2236 31.2.2, 361-362.
6 AFMAN 36-2236 31.2.2, 361-362.
7 Hill, *Helping Skills*, 458.

a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives."[8] Frankl also speaks of meaning as individually unique and unique to every individual, "This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him [or her] alone; only then does it achieve a significance that will satisfy his [or her] own *will* to meaning."[9]

This search for meaning begins at birth. "The child's experiences in the first half dozen years of life become roots for the ability to regulate impulses, and exercise self-restraint, control the expression of emotions, and develop empathy, mindfulness, and conscience."[10] But learning to sift through the experiences of our childhoods takes maturity, perhaps this is why, "Whatever your age, it's never too early or late to begin cultivating a sense of purpose."[11] It is with maturity that we can begin to understand our inner self to a greater degree.

Self-Reflection

Metacognition is a mature quality that the majority of children simply do not yet have, but can eventually attain if taught to recognize feelings, emotions, and motivations from an early age leading to earlier development of mature self-reflection. As we mature we are more fully able to control those things, that as children seemed nearly impossible to control, namely our emotions and thoughts. Thinking about our emotions helps us to control them, "What we tell ourselves is or becomes our thoughts and emotions. Thus, our negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, embarrassment, and shame come from our thinking process. Simply stated, if we can learn to control our thinking, we can learn to control our emotions."[12]

Self-Evaluation

If we are subconsciously pursuing our individual meanings, are there ways to consciously do the same? Along with the "values clarification" already mentioned, which can be used when we notice the dissonance between who we perceive ourselves to be and how others perceive us, there are other meaningful ways to pursue our individual meaning. The self-evaluation that we allow ourselves to make during a "values clarification" may highlight pursuits and interests that stand out above other endeavors that we engage in.

Moral Compass

These highlighted pursuits could very well be our passions. Our passions can be our compass to meaning. This compass is, "that thing that takes you some time to build, tinker with, and finally get right, and that then guides you on your long and winding road to where, ultimately

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8 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 99.
9 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 99.
10 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 86.
11 Duckworth, *Grit*, 165.
12 AFMAN 36-2236 30.13.1, 358.

you want to be."[13] Our compass to meaning may be overlooked for more temporary pleasure, but it is in sticking to the guidelines of our core values that we find the lasting path to meaning. In other words, we need to maintain a consistent and persistent path to find meaning, "Adherence to our own moral compass is inextricably linked to resilience."[14]

Some may find such a path in religion and spirituality, through which they may come to feel that they understand, "their role in the universe, the purpose of life, and develop the courage to endure suffering."[15]

Other considerations to finding meaning can be linked to our adherence to our moral compass, we can do this by:

1) Taking an inventory of our most closely held beliefs and values.

2) Learning from the writings and examples of ethical women and men.

3) Discussing our beliefs with people whose values we respect.

4) Practicing our values, particularly during times of adversity.[16]

Purpose

Purpose includes many qualities:

1) Purpose is a goal (but a bigger goal than something commonplace like finding a seat in a restaurant.)

2) Purpose is an essential part of finding personal meaning, but it also includes a desire to impact the world around us.

3) Purpose can be used to drive pursuits with which one may feel a sense of accomplishment even if the end is never met.[17]

Finding purpose may come naturally to some, "For a few, a sense of purpose dawns early, but for many, the motivation to serve others heightens *after* the development of interest and years of disciplined practice."[18] The majority of people fall into the latter category. This stresses the need for perseverance in pursuing meaning, as well as flexibility. To reach where you want to be may take some flexibility. Like the adopted Marine motto, finding meaning may make us need to "Improvise, adapt, and overcome any obstacle in whatever situation."[19] If the passions that motivate us are important enough to us, we maintain interest, we seek to develop and practice them, and in doing so, we eventually find purpose. Purpose then brings forth hope, which is itself the fertile soil for interest, practice, and purpose. Hope, "defines every

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13 Duckworth, *Grit,* 60.
14 Southwick, *Resilience*, 106-107.
15 George, "Spirituality and Health," 111.
16 Southwick, *Resilience*, 106-107.
17 Damon, *Noble Purpose*, 11.
18 Duckworth, *Grit,* 91.
19 "Until Every Battle is Won," United States Marines.

stage (of perseverance)."[20] The journey to discover interests and passions need not be a Hardy Boys mystery, although it may seem so, "passion for your work is a little bit of *discovery*, followed by a lot of *development*, and then a lifetime of *deepening*."[21] There is almost a pattern to finding purpose:

Step 1) a spark (something you are interested in)

Step 2) an observation of someone who is purposeful

Step 3) a revelation that a problem in the world needs solving

Step 4) a realization that we *personally* can make a difference[22]

This is perhaps one way to see the progression of purpose, but there are other practical ways to do so as well:

1) Consider how the things you have done, or are doing already, contribute in a positive way to the community and society as a whole.

2) Consider how the work that you do now may be enhanced by a more firm connection to your core values.

3) Consider seeking out a purposeful role model for inspiration.[23]

Self-Narrative

Another way to find purpose and meaning is by reflecting on the story of self, or the self-narrative. Our narratives are the way in which we place ourselves in this world. Our stories are a way that we cope with the events that have occurred in our lives, and they help us explain or validate our reactions to those events. For individuals who adopt a victim role in their narratives, or are self-defeating, seeing the world as unsafe, wholly unfair, unpredictable, and other people as unreliable and dishonest, there is a pattern of higher levels of distress in life. At the same time, for others who may have similar events within their narratives but who view themselves as survivors or even thrivers, there is a greater correlation to hope and growth.

We all live similar experiences, and we can choose to give ourselves a role in our narratives that will help to determine our purpose and meaning in the most meaningful way.[24] This begins by "thinking of yourself as someone who is able to overcome tremendous adversity" which in turn "often leads to behavior that confirms that self-conception."[25]

One way that psychology has created techniques to reframe personal narratives is through cognitive behavioral therapy. This has been used to treat depression as well as a number of other mental health issues as patients are able to think about their issues more objectively. This in turn

20 Duckworth, *Grit*, 91-92.
21 Duckworth, *Grit,* 103.
22 Duckworth, *Grit,* 162-163.
23 Duckworth, *Grit*, 166-167.
24 Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 134.
25 Duckworth, *Grit*, 252.

leads to healthier attitudes and behaviors, and it has also shown that, "whatever our childhood sufferings, we can generally learn to observe our negative self-talk and change our maladaptive behaviors."[26]

Altruism (Other-Centered Service)

It is not unusual that many people find initial interest by first becoming, "attracted to things they enjoy and only later appreciate how these personal interests might also benefit others."[27] Pursuing interests fulfills part of the search for meaning. But it does not fulfill it fully. Our pursuit of meaning often finds a way from focusing on self-interests to how those interests might impact others for good, "In other words, the more common sequence is to start out with a relatively self-oriented interest, then learn self-disciplined practice, and, finally integrate that work with an other-centered progression."[28]

Passion can lead to other-centered service. Meaning can come from doing what interests us not just for our own benefit, but for others. An interest that benefits others can be self-sustaining as it amplifies our perceived earned benefit and return. "For most people, interest without purpose is nearly impossible to sustain for a lifetime. It is therefore imperative that you identify your work as both personally interesting and, at the same time, integrally connected to the well-being of others."[29] Finding purpose in what we do has a center in providing some benefit to those around us. "At its core, the idea of purpose is the idea that what we do matters to people other than ourselves."[30]

For Duckworth, "purpose means the intention to contribute to the well-being of others.'" Duckworth continues by saying that according to her Grit Scale[31] a pursuit of interests may initially bring pleasure, but as pleasure becomes purpose, there is a correspondence between having meaning or purpose, and being resilient. When pleasure and purpose were compared on the grit scale with a sample size of about 16,000 adults it was found that "grittier people are *dramatically* more motivated to seek a meaningful, other-centered life."[32]

Current Pursuits

Purpose and meaning are not always found in some grand pursuit, or at the top of the highest mountains, though they can be. Purpose and meaning can be found in current pursuits. The parable of the brick layer separates three individuals who were laying brick into three categories. One does the work as a job, one does the work as a career, and the last does the work as a calling. Research has shown that in about

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26 Duckworth, *Grit*, 176.
27 Duckworth, *Grit,* 143-144.
28 Duckworth, *Grit,* 143-144.
29 Duckworth, *Grit,* 91.
30 Duckworth, *Grit,* 145.
31 See the Grit test attached to the end of the lesson plan
32 Duckworth, *Grit*, 147.

equal numbers this is how workers identify themselves as they perform their work duties. That one-third who do the work as a job see it as a necessity like any other routine obligation. Working is as necessary as breathing or sleeping. The one-third who see the work as a career see it as a stepping stone to grander pursuits or other jobs. The one-third who see the same work as their calling claim it be the one of the most important parts of their life, and a key characteristic of who they are.[33] "what matters is whether the person doing the work *believes* that laying down the next brick is just something that has to be done, or instead something that will lead to further personal success, or, finally, work that connects the individual to something far greater than the self."[34]

A way to find meaning, then, is to find it where you are. To assume that you can make a difference where you are can be a key step in progressing from pursuit of interest to discovery of meaning. If the assumption is made the other way, then there is almost certainly a guarantee that you will not find the change that you desire. "When you keep searching for ways to change your situation for the better, you stand a chance of finding them. When you stop searching, assuming they can't be found, you guarantee they won't."[35] This echoes Walter D. Wintle's assertion that "Whether you think you can, or think you can't – you're right."[36]

Self-Actualization

When a person has found meaning they can be categorized as self-actualized. These are individuals that have an acceptance of themselves and others. They are spontaneous, open, more prone to listen, creative, funny, and independent. "In addition, self-actualized individuals *appreciate events*, such as a sunrise, more intensely than others."[37] These are individuals who have mastered the skill of self-control, which can be "the 'master aptitude' underlying emotional intelligence, essential for constructing a fulfilling life."[38]

Conclusion

Finding meaning does not mean that a person becomes stagnant, rather it creates a greater amount of flexibility and the humility to admit when something is not working out. Individuals who have found meaning are not afraid to make the mistakes necessary to ultimately reach the best outcomes. As described by the master puzzle maker, Will Shortz, and explained further by Angela Duckworth, "*Don't be afraid to erase an answer that isn't working out*. At some point, you may choose to write your top-level goal in indelible ink, but until you know for sure, work in

33 Duckworth, *Grit,* 150.
34 Duckworth, *Grit,* 152.
35 Duckworth, *Grit,* 178.
36 Wintle, *"If You Think You Are Beaten."*
37 Yount, "Transcendence and Aging," 73-87.
38 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 11.

pencil."[39] Finding meaning is one way in which a person can engage in building an attitude of resiliency.

Ask for student perspectives.

Complete the Grit Test.

Restate objective.

Provide a reminder of the next lessons time, location, and subject.

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39 Shortz, "How to Solve the New York Times Crossword Puzzle,". See also Duckworth, *Grit*, 115.

The Grit Test

	Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
1.New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.	5	4	3	2	1
4. I am a hard worker.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.	5	4	3	2	1
6. I finish whatever I begin.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My interests change from year to year.	5	4	3	2	1
8. I am diligent. I never give up.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lose interest.	5	4	3	2	1
10. I have overcome setbacks to conquer and important challenge.	1	2	3	4	5

4 Pillars of Comprehensive Fitness

U.S. AIR FORCE

GOAL: LIFE BALANCE

WELLNESS - RESILIENCE

Mental   Physical   Social   Spiritual

Fly, Fight and Win...

Lessons in Spiritual Resiliency for Comprehensive Airman Fitness

Lesson 2

Building Community

Instructor_____

For small group instruction (2-20 class members)

Use guided discussion in presentation of materials

Objective –

Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to recognize how to build community and what communities they are part of.

Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will identify the type of relationships that they are part of, as well as differentiate between the communities that they are part of.

Step 3. TEST ITEM: List the communities and relationships that you are part of. Identify other communities that you desire to be part of.

By the end of the lesson, class members should be able to answer or complete the following questions and prompts-

Knowledge Level: List a number of groups that you consider a
community.

Comprehension Level: What are the ideal factors that you would
consider if you were to build your own community?

Application Level: What are ways that you can reach out to members
of our community as a positive voice and presence?

Class members need access to Building Community Chapter 2.

Lesson Outline

Key Words – **Community, Wingmen, Building Relationships, Romantic Relationships, Kinship, Friendship, Acquaintances, Religion and Spirituality**

Begin the second lesson with a simple icebreaker. Pass a ball between the students and have them describe the previous lesson in one word, or what their understanding of building community may be in one word. (Or something similar.)

Remind students of expectations of attendance, and responsibilities of class members (as per unit guidelines, if any.)

Address safety precautions such as evacuation locations as necessary(as per unit guidelines, if any.)

State the objective as outlined on the cover page of the lesson.

> Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to recognize how to build community and what communities they are part of.

> Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will identify the type of relationships that they are part of, as well as differentiate between the communities that they are part of.

> Step 3. TEST ITEM: List the communities and relationships that you are part of. Identify other communities that you desire to be part of.

Discuss the key words in the chapter and ask class members if they have any *background knowledge* on the key words or the subject of the lesson.

Present the lesson. This should be done in discussion format. It should not be read word for word, but certain portions can and should be read as appropriate.

Allow students the opportunity to ask questions or to present their favorite (or least favorite parts of the material.)

Building Community Chapter 2

Community

Being a community has many nuances. There is a consideration for size, similarities, commonality, and even elements that are not homogeneous. One way to define community is through the culture that exists therein. Some considerations of culture are customs, values, attitudes, beliefs, characteristics, and behaviors which are shared by a group of people. This is further divided by specific

moments in history. Often it is associated with any group of people who identify with a particular purpose, desire, or background. Culture also includes considerations pertaining to "race/ethnicity, gender, age, ideology, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability status, occupation, and dietary preferences."[1] These considerations among others can help an individual find a place within an accepting community. The Air Force community is no different, like any community it has developed "norms; that is, shared expectations of conduct and participation that guide and regulate group behavior."[2] Elements of the norms found in Air Force culture include ideas like the role of wingman, and the wingman concept.

Wingmen

A wingman is an Airman that looks out for another. A wingman engages the Air Force core values and displays a willingness of "Service Before Self." A wingman anticipates difficulties and acts appropriately to secure the welfare of another Airman, who may in turn be their Wingman. "The Wingman's role is to add an element of mutual support that aids situational awareness and decision making, increasing the ability to successfully prevent or resolve difficulties."[3] This is also the center of the wingman concept which is, "A culture of Airmen taking care of Airmen whether in uniform or not."[4] Within the wingman concept is the push to "practice healthy behaviors, make responsible choices, and encourage others to do the same."[5]

Within the Air Force culture as well, all Airmen, acting as wingmen, are obligated to reinforce a "culture of early help-seeking and recognize the signs and symptoms of distress in themselves and others and take protective action."[6] While any Airman is entitled to be part of the Air Force community and culture from boot-camp to separation, retirement, and veteran status, there are other needs of community that can be met by fostering relationships both inside and outside of the Air Force. People who are part of something together are more prone to greater resiliency. They can be fulfilled and also help others to be so as well. "Either small environmental differences, or genetic ones, can trigger a virtuous cycle. Either way, the effects are multiplied socially, through culture, because each of us enriches the environment of all of us."[7]

That a community is based on a culture with some type of commonality increases the opportunity for one person to be part of multiple communities not just based on a move from one locale to another, but at the same time, and regardless of location. Technology has extended

1 Hill, *Helping Skills*, 452.
2 AFMAN 36-2236 29.4, 343.
3 AFMAN 36-2236 29.4, 343.
4 AFI 90-5001, 46.
5 AFI 90-5001 5.4.5, 36.
6 AFI 90-5001 5.4.5, 36.
7 Duckworth, *Grit,* 84.

our community reach to the global level. "At its core, a culture is defined by the shared norms and values of a group of people. In other words, a distinct culture exists anytime a group of people are in consensus about how we do things around here and why."[8] The individuals inside of a community can become more resilient, and in doing so collectively they can make the community as a whole resilient, "Whether it's stopping a behavioral contagion (like needle sharing among drug users) or challenging a social norm (like getting people to recycle their trash), social resilience often rests on the adaptive capacity of a community, or its ability to sense, interdict, and intervene."[9]

When building community, it is important to be mindful of just how strong the desire to be part of a community is, "The drive to fit in – to conform to the group – is powerful indeed. Some of the most important psychology experiments in history have demonstrated how quickly, and usually without conscious awareness, the individual falls in line with a group that is acting or thinking a different way."[10] This can be a negative and a positive. It can be negative because in the satisfying the need to fit in, a person may lose sight of their own personal core values and moral compass, choosing instead to follow the standard set by a group, however wrong that group's ideologies may be in the scope of history.[11] The positive is that communities may foster in us strengths that are desirable and worthy of our time and efforts. For instance, if there is a greater desire to develop resilience and grit, a community may be the most fertile soil to do so, "The bottom line on culture and grit is: *If you want to be grittier, find a gritty community and join it. If you're a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture*."[12]

Building Relationships

The age range of most military members, especially those who are entering the armed services is set in a stage of development that requires social connection. In Erikson's 6th stage of development, a period of time connected to 18-30 year-olds, there is a connection between building relationships or increasing intimacy vs. becoming prone to isolation. Young adults who embrace intimacy in the 6th stage, "are able to establish personal relationships based on openness and mutual confidence." Whereas isolated "Adults tend to be emotionally isolated, and have difficulty giving or receiving love."[13] Simply put, "In order to thrive in this world, we need other people."[14]

Does dependence on others make us weaker beings? Independence

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8 Duckworth, *Grit*, 244.
9 Zolli, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, 212.
10 Duckworth, *Grit*, 247.
11 See Christopher R. Browning, Ordinary Men (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).This book highlights the type of people involved in the atrocities of the Holocaust.
12 Duckworth, *Grit*, 245.
13 Yount, "Transcendence and Aging," 73-87.
14 Southwick, *Resilience,* 136.

is, after all, a sign of maturity and growth. However, "Far from signifying weakness, interdependence with others can provide a foundation for resilience."[15] College campuses have taken note as cases of depression and anxiety have spiked in recent years by placing emphasis on building communities of resilience. In one example, a class focused solely on positive psychology and gaining resilience began by addressing the need for communication and dialogue on a personal level. At the beginning of the first day of class, the barriers of social anxiety were addressed as the student participants were asked to greet each other in various role plays. They were asked to pretend to meet people as if they were walking around New York City. Initially they were to introduce themselves to people who had no interest in meeting them, then to powerful people like CEO's and finally to a friend that they had not seen in five years.[16] This role play set forth the groundwork for what a person seeking community might initially face, namely rejection, inadequacy, or perhaps familiarity. Opening up lines of communication can be a crucial step in developing community.

There are a number of traditional relationships that tie into an individual's community. These include romantic relationships, kinship, friendships, acquaintances, and religious and spiritual groups. Overall strategies for developing stronger relationships include:

1. Partner with someone similar, communicate kindly and clearly and forgive faults

2. Maintain contact with your extended family

3. Maintain a few close friendships

4. Co-operate with acquaintances

5. Engage in religious or spiritual practices[17]

Relationships do not need to fit entirely within the framework of those outlined, but in whatever way they are experienced by each individual there is a fundamental need fulfilled and the potential for gaining greater strength, "Within the broad domain of relationships, marriage, kinship, close friend-ships, co-operation with acquaintances and involvement in religion and spiritual practices are all associated with enduring happiness and well-being."[18]

Romantic Relationships

In romantic relationships there is a bonding that allows for interdependence. One of the most significant ways that we demonstrate this bond is through marriage. Marriage is constantly changing, and it, among the other types of relationships yet to be discussed, is among

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15 Southwick, *Resilience*, 136.

16 Pattani, "Can You Teach Students to be Happy? Colleges are Trying."

17 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, Table 1.6, 37.

18 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 20.

the most socially fluid concepts of community and culture. Marriage has its benefits, and its deficits, "married people are happier than unmarried people, be they divorced, separated or never married […] However, the least happy of all are people trapped in unhappy marriages."[19]

When pursuing a romantic partner, it is important to consider a spectrum of factors. Studies show that, "Partners similar in personality, ability, physical attractiveness, attitudes, interests, values and politics are more likely to experience marital satisfaction, remain married, avoid conflict and infidelity, and provide their children with a stable home environment."[20] If a romantic relationship is not healthy, there are psychological and physical issues that may arise. "Bad" relationships can be worked on, however, and much of the turmoil in romantic relationships can be overcome by communication. Where we have the ability in the Western world to choose a romantic partner, we are less able to choose our connections and relationships with family.

Kinship

Kinship refers to the relationships found within family. These relationships may include, "Close supportive relationships between parents and children, between siblings and between extended family members," and they can, "enhance the social support available to all family members."[21] The family has been a basis for society, culture, and community for millennia, and continues, at its core, to be a generally positive aspect of humanity. "This social support enhances subjective well-being and from an evolutionary perspective we are 'hard-wired' to derive happiness from this contact with our kinship networks."[22]

Some methods to deepen the relationships that we have with our families include keeping in regular contact with family members.[23] Planning our lifestyles in such a way as to, "maintain closer physical contact with your family."[24] Technology allows us to use e-mail, cell phone, videoconferencing, social apps, and other means to stay in touch.[25] There are situations where connection to kin or relationships with family are negative. Not all people want to continue communication with their extended family, for a number of reasons including abuse, estrangement, or neglect. The term "family" can be taken to mean those individuals who have been incorporated into an individual's close social network.

Friendship

Outside of kinship, there is a great deal of support that can come from

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19 Carr, *Positive Pyschology,* 20.
20 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22.
21 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22.
22 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22.
23 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22.
24 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22
25 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 22.

friendships. Among the many reasons that friends can be beneficial there are three reasons why friendships lead to happiness:

1. "Happy people may be more often selected as friends and confidants, because they are more attractive companions than miserable people. They also help others more than depressed people who are self-focused and less altruistic."[26]

2. "Confiding relationships meet needs for affiliation and so make us feel happy and satisfied."[27]

3. "Close friendships provide social support."[28]

The support of good friends is beneficial, but the cultivation of these relationships requires investment of time and value. If you find it difficult to find or begin these relationships, some of the greatest friendships are with those that you regularly associate with. "If you want to make good friends, choose work or leisure activities where you are likely to meet people who share similar interests to you and are similar in overall abilities, status and life experience to you."[29] Having a diverse population of friends can also be beneficial, especially if that diversity is rooted in some common interest, "Since friendships between people who are more similar have been shown to be deeper than those between dissimilar people."[30]

Investing into a friendship may also be difficult for some individuals. Remember what may come naturally to some does not always come naturally to others. Like any learned behavior, the ability to gain association with others can be a learned skill. As a friendship begins to flourish there are ways to determine if the friendship has gained traction and may be a lasting one. "To distinguish fair-weather friends from truly committed friends, once a friendship has developed, test the strength of the bond by disclosing some imperfection about yourself" or extend an invitation for that friend to help you.[31]

Acquaintances

For those associations with people around us that are more casual or professional there are also ways to build relationships with acquaintances. These are individuals who we may work with or interact with on a routine basis. Building relationships with such people can be mutually beneficial, so long as the relationship is built on a cooperative foundation. "To enhance our own sense of well-being we should develop strategies for promoting co-operation with acquaintances, not competition."[32] These associations must also be built on a foundation of

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26 Carr, *Positive Psychology,* 23.
27 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 23.
28 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 23.
29 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 23.
30 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 23.
31 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 23.
32 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24.

communication, "In all important relationships make sure that yourself and others are aware that the relationship will last indefinitely into the future and the long-term co-operation confers mutual benefits."[33] The mutual benefit of these relationships can be shown through example by "returning the favor," and in an equal measure benefiting those that have helped you, "If another person does you a favor or helps you, return the favour or help with a gesture of similar (not lesser) value."[34]

In an ever-evolving world, it may also be necessary to redefine some relationships in new and nuanced ways, "Perhaps we can develop many kinds of new rituals to acknowledge, celebrate, and deepen the sustaining bonds that are beginning to function for us as new models of family, extended family, and community."[35]

Religion and Spirituality

If an individual is seeking a greater meaning and purpose, as well as the comfort of community and relationships religion and spirituality offer both. Religion and spirituality can also offer three serious psychological strengths:

1. "Religion provides a coherent belief system that allows people to find meaning in life and hope for the future."[36]

2. "Involvement in routine attendance at religious services and being part of a religious community provides people with social support."[37]

3. "Involvement in religion is often associated with a physically and psychologically healthier lifestyle characterized by marital fidelity; prosocial altruistic behavior (rather than criminality); moderations in eating and drinking; and a commitment to hard work."[38]

As the focus of this project is building spiritual resiliency, it should be noted that the goal of this work is not to offer an endorsement of a specific religious denomination or spiritual practice. But it is undeniable that such practices have a positive effect and build resiliency, "When compared to their nonreligious peers, people who regularly attend religious services report (1) having larger social networks; (2) having more contact with these social networks; (3) receiving more help from others; and (4) being more satisfied with their social support networks."[39]

As we share our roles in our narratives with others we build lines of communication and connection. "Our stories are our identities. How we

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33 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24.
34 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24,
35 Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, 141.
36 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24.
37 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24.
38 Carr, *Positive Psychology,* 24.
39 Glicken, *Learning From Resilient People,* 30.

relate them to each other constructively, so that we mutually understand each other, is the basis of communication."[40] The connections that we make with people also require an amount of self-control if they are to become lasting and meaningful relationships. Self-control, "is equally essential for developing the self-restraint and empathy needed to build caring and mutually supportive relationships."[41] In building such relationships we are increasing what Erik Erikson described as generativity. "Generativity is the work that we do in our homes, our communities, and our religious congregations to improve the well-being of future generations."[42] As we are built up and strengthened by a community, we build a solid footing for those who will come after. Resiliency can be a generational link. Along with community there are also positive coping mechanisms which strengthen resiliency.

Ask for student perspectives, have a few identify the types of communities that they are part of, or those that they want to be part of.

Restate objective.

Provide a reminder of the next lesson's time, location, and subject.

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40 Aldridge, *Spirituality, Healing and Medicine*, 17.

41 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, 11.

42 Milstein, "Normative and Diagnostic Reactions to Disaster," 223.

Part 1: Cover Sheet

Notes:

Lesson 3

Using Positive Coping Mechanisms

Instructor_____

For small group instruction (2-20 class members)

Use guided discussion in presentation of materials

Objective –

Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to recognize positive coping mechanisms.

Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will identify their own coping mechanisms and among those, identify those which are positive.

Step 3. TEST ITEM: Outline your current coping mechanisms and explain which positive coping mechanisms you want to develop.

By the end of the lesson, class members should be able to answer or complete the following questions and prompts-

Knowledge Level: Identify among a list of possible coping mechanisms, those that are positive coping mechanisms.

Comprehension Level: Given possible scenarios, what coping mechanisms were utilized? What are some other positive coping mechanisms that could have been utilized?

Application Level: Think of one habit or harmful coping mechanism that you have. What can you do to overcome it, and what positive coping mechanism can you start to develop to take its place?

Class members need access to Using Positive Coping Mechanisms Chapter 3

Lesson Outline

Key Words – **Habits, Self-Defeating Behavior, Feedback, Ten Thousand Hours, Self-Control, Resilient Youth, Positive Coping Mechanisms, If-Then, Routine, Humor, Religion and Spirituality**

Begin the third lesson with a simple icebreaker. Pass a ball between the students and have them describe the previous lesson in one word, or state a coping mechanism that they feel might be positive. (Or something similar.)

Remind students of expectations of attendance, and responsibilities of class members (as per unit guidelines, if any.)

Address safety precautions such as evacuation locations as necessary (as per unit guidelines, if any.)

State the objective as outlined on the cover page of the lesson.

> Step 1. LEVEL-OF-LEARNING OBJECTIVE: The objective of this lesson is for each student to recognize positive coping mechanisms.

> Step 2. SAMPLE OF BEHAVIOR: Each student will identify their own coping mechanisms and among those, identify those which are positive.

> Step 3. TEST ITEM: Outline your current coping mechanisms and explain which positive coping mechanisms you want to develop.

Discuss the key words in the chapter and ask class members if they have any *background knowledge* on the key words or the subject of the lesson.

Present the lesson. This should be done in discussion format. It should not be read word for word, but certain portions can and should be read as appropriate.

Allow students the opportunity to ask questions or to present their favorite (or least favorite parts of the material.)

Using Positive Coping Mechanisms Chapter 3

Habits

Human beings operate based on habits. It is often these habits that form the basis for coping when things become difficult. We see runners turning to running in times of stress, as well as swimmers to swimming, musicians to music, and so on. What then do habitual pessimists turn to? What about people with negative coping mechanisms? Our self-concepts as discussed previously, play a role in the defense mechanisms that we use during adversity. "Whether we are aware of it or not, all of us use

certain defense mechanisms to preserve or protect our self-concepts."[1] We base our reactions to daily stress on the effectiveness of habits that we use as a defense. In many cases these habits can form a positive dam of sorts, so that the accumulated strain and stress of the day to day do not overflow the limits of our emotional reservoirs. "In fact, our success in meeting daily stresses and strains of living can be traced to our effectiveness in using certain defenses."[2]

Self-Defeating Behavior

There are defenses, however, that may limit our ability to respond to stress in a constructive way by causing us to avoid responsibility, risk taking, or making excuses for bad or self-destructive decisions. These defenses certainly have a negative impact on the behaviors that we engage in. Negativity aside, self-defense mechanisms are practical as well as necessary and, "Their use is normal unless they begin to interfere with the maintenance of self-esteem rather than aiding it. Defense mechanisms can best be understood in view of the objective they serve, which is to safeguard the integrity and worth of the self."[3] The opposing mindsets of optimism and pessimism also play a role in how we respond to stress, "optimists habitually search for temporary and specific causes of their suffering, whereas pessimists assume permanent and pervasive causes are to blame."[4] In this case, pessimism can be a self-defeating behavior.

Some other self-defeating behaviors are compensation (when we short change one weakness by emphasizing a perceived strength,) projection (when we put the blame on others for out own shortcomings,) rationalization, denial of reality, and reaction formation (which shows an outward appearance opposite to our real internal emotions.)[5] Habits are by no means wholly a negative thing, "routines are a Godsend when it comes to doing something hard."[6] Likewise, the way that we address our own selves can be a key to increasing positive coping mechanisms, "you can, in fact, modify your self-talk, and you can learn to not let it interfere with you moving toward your goals. With practice and guidance, you can change the way you think, feel, and, most important, act when the going gets rough."[7]

Feedback

One recurring point of stress is our reaction to feedback. In some cases, we avoid it altogether, or ignore it if we think our methods better than any suggestions offered. This is a negative coping mechanism. The elite in their fields did not become better by ignoring feedback, they listened,

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1 AFMAN 36-2236 31.4, 364.
2 AFMAN 36-2236 31.4, 364.
3 AFMAN 36-2236 31.4, 364.
4 Duckworth, *Grit*, 174.
5 AFMAN 36-2236 31.4.1-31.4.5, 365.
6 Duckworth, *Grit*, 139.
7 Duckworth, *Grit*, 193.

and they pursued greater amounts of it, "As soon as possible, experts hungrily seek feedback on how they did. Necessarily, much of that feedback is negative. This means that experts are more interested in what they did *wrong* – so they can fix it—than what they did *right*. The active processing of this feedback is as essential as its immediacy."[8] Negative feedback, whether external or internal may be the reason that so many pursuits are ended as abruptly as they began. When we do not see immediate success in an endeavor, we tend to rationalize that we were never going to succeed in that thing anyway. Positive coping mechanisms can and should motivate us to continue a pursuit, even though it seems like we may fail, "Many of us, it seems, quit what we start far too early and far too often. Even more than the effort a gritty person puts in on a single day, what matters is that they wake up the next day, and the next, ready to get on that treadmill and keep going."[9]

Ten Thousand Hours

Immediate success is rare. Sometimes, when gains are slow, and mastery seems a to be a distance too far to reach, it may be worthwhile to take a step back, "If you get stuck on a puzzle, a time-honored technique is to put it aside and return later. Perhaps the brain works subconsciously on problems in the interim. Whatever the case, a fresh look at a tough puzzle almost always brings new answers."[10] One must also bear in mind that mastery is rarely if ever accomplished in a short amount of time with difficult tasks. "The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours."[11]

Self-Control

Perseverance, resilience, and discipline are a few positive coping mechanisms. Perseverance can be both long term and short term, "One form of perseverance is the daily discipline of trying to do things better than we did yesterday."[12] As the theme of this project suggests, these traits can also be grown and cultivated within each person, through, "deliberate practice."[13] Deliberate practice is the concentrated effort of seeking out weaknesses and consciously developing strengths. "You must zero in on your weaknesses, and you must do so over and over again, for hours a day, week after month after year."[14] Deliberate practice is essential because, "If you judge practice by how much it improves your skill, then deliberate practice has no rival."[15]

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8 Duckworth, *Grit,* 122.

9 Duckworth, *Grit,* 50.

10 Shortz, "How to Solve the New York Times Crossword Puzzle."

11 Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, 34.

12 Duckworth, *Grit,* 91.

13 Duckworth, *Grit*, 120.

14 Duckworth, *Grit,* 91.

15 Duckworth, *Grit*, 126.

Perseverance, resilience, and discipline may be long term goals for some, as they can be difficult characteristics to foster. They grow from the seed of self-control, "Self-control is crucial for the successful pursuit of long-term goals."[16] In essence, developing positive coping mechanisms takes time. The defense mechanisms that we have now did not spring up overnight, nor did they develop in a vacuum. Focusing on fostering positive mechanisms before inevitable stress and trauma takes some amount of faith. The work that you put into it is worth it, the examples of others who have done the work ahead of us and cleared the path can provide some encouragement for what lies ahead. Likewise, as others pursue greater defense mechanisms we should support them in their efforts. "Ultimately, adopting a gritty perspective involves recognizing that people get better at things—they grow. Just as we want to cultivate the ability to get up off the floor when life has knocked us down, we want to give those around us the benefit of the doubt when something they've tried isn't a raging success."[17]

Yet another coping skill is found in mastering self-control, "While not guaranteeing success and a rosy future, self-control ability greatly improves the chances, helping us make the tough choice and sustain the effort needed to reach our goals."[18] Being able to overcome what some may call "temptations" is rooted in self-control. Whether the focus is staying on a diet, trying to finish term papers, or setting firm boundaries with others, self-control is key. One way to practice self-control when you find yourself in a situation that may compromise your focus and goals is to ask yourself how someone else would behave in the same situation. This mental activity takes us out of the "heat" of the moment and allows us to use pre-frontal cortex reasoning to stay on task and focused.[19]

The pre-frontal cortex is our most evolved region of the brain. It is here that we process higher-level thinking. It is here that our minds are even able to think about themselves in metacognition. Our humanity and unique make-up as rational animals are processed in the pre-frontal cortex. "It regulates our thoughts, actions, and emotions, is the source of creativity and imagination, and is crucial for inhibiting inappropriate actions that interfere with the pursuit of goals."[20] The pre-frontal cortex allows us to refocus our thoughts and attention and to be flexible enough to change as events unfold. "Self-control ability is rooted in the PFC [pre-frontal cortex]."[21] When we do not have positive coping mechanisms and are put under stress, even in doing the most trivial things, we can unbalance the processes of reasoning in the pre-frontal cortex, which is impaired by prolonged stress."[22]

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16 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 11.
17 Duckworth, *Grit,* 184-185.
18 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 15.
19 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, 74.
20 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 70.
21 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test*, 70.
22 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 75.

Resilient Youth

When is the best time to practice resilience and positive psychology? Undoubtedly, "More than a decade of research has shown that teaching youth resilience and positive psychology can reduce and prevent symptoms of depression and anxiety, lower stress, and promote wellbeing."[23] It is plasticity of the mind that allows for the best returns of resiliency later in life. Youth simply have a better rate of adopting new skills and forming new coping mechanisms. Resilient youth have some common characteristics. 1) They actively problem-solve. 2) They can perceive adversity, even painful adversity, constructively 3.) They have an ability to gain the attention of other people 4.) They have an ability to maintain an idea of meaning in their life through faith.[24] It is youth that were resilient and stuck with their interests, whether academic, in sports, or in the arts, that showed the greatest resilience later in life. Following-through with an extra-curricular activity that they have joined is linked to greater high school and college graduation rates in young people, "Likewise, follow-through was the single best predictor of holding an appointed or elected leadership position in young adulthood…follow-through predicted notable accomplishments for a young adult in all domains, from the arts and writing to entrepreneurism and community service."[25] Follow-through is itself a coping mechanism and a way to further the positive coping mechanism found in extra-curricular activities, "the *particular* pursuits to which students had devoted themselves in high school didn't matter" they could pursue sports, student government, debate, or any other extra-curricular, but the key to later success was that, "students had signed up for *something*, signed up *again* the following year, and during that time had made some kind of *progress*."[26] This is especially important in the conversation of positive coping mechanisms. There are several recreational pursuits, hobbies, and social groups that one may become involved in that are positive and uplifting, but there are few, if any that do not have a learning curb. Leaving a pursuit too early bears none of the benefits that follow-through would gain.

Positive Coping Mechanisms

Lest more mature populations feel that all is lost if they didn't join the football team or serve as class president while still in their formative years, this project is determined to show that "The capabilities that underlie resilience can be strengthened at any age."[27] The greatest adaptability in our brains and biological systems may come earlier in life, but it is never too late to build resilience. There are a number of age-appropriate, and healthy activities that are good coping mechanisms,

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23 Pattani "Can you Teach Students to be Happy, Colleges are Trying."
24 Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*, 91.
25 Duckworth, *Grit*, 229.
26 Duckworth, *Grit,* 229.
27 "Resilience," Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University.

and that lead to greater odds of recovery after trauma or other stress causing events.

Routine exercise, stress-reduction practices, and "programs that actively build executive function and self-regulation skills can improve the abilities of children and adults to cope with, adapt to, and even prevent adversity in their lives." It benefits all adults to strengthen these skills so that they can also, "model healthy behaviors for their children, thereby improving the resilience of the next generation."[28] Our minds are like muscles, they grow stronger through use. What is more, the brain also "changes itself when you struggle to master a new challenge. In fact, there's never a time in life when the brain is completely 'fixed.'"[29] The neurons in our brains are constantly creating new and potential connections, as well as strengthening old ones. This ability is not completely lost as we age, "throughout adulthood, we maintain the ability to grow myelin, a sort of insulating sheath that protects neurons and speeds signals traveling between them."[30]

If-Then

Another coping mechanism is to establish thought activities that will encourage self-improvement and pushing past our limits. One such activity is developing "If-then" plans. These are plans that predetermine how we will react to an event when we come upon it. Many people do this in the form of imagined heated arguments with so and so while in the shower, driving, or otherwise engaged in activities that require minimal brain work. "When *If-Then* plans are established, they work well in surprisingly diverse settings, with different populations and age groups, and they can help people more effectively achieve difficult goals—goals that they previously thought they could not reach."[31]

Routine

A routine is a coping mechanism that can allow us to use self-control and reduce the brain power necessary to answer the basic questions of, "When will I get up tomorrow?" Or, "What will I wear or eat?" Following a routine may seem like one is putting themselves on autopilot, "But one's daily routine is also a choice, or a series of choices. In the right hands, it can be a finely calibrated mechanism for taking advantage of a range of limited resources: time […] as well as willpower, self-discipline, and] optimism."[32] An excellent routine can create a "well grown groove for one's mental engines and helps stave off the tyranny of moods."[33]

Humor

28 "Resilience," Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University.
29 Duckworth, *Grit,* 191.
30 Duckworth, *Grit,* 192-193.
31 Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test,* 103.
32 Currey, *Daily Rituals*, Introduction xvi.
33 Currey, *Daily Rituals,* Introduction xvi.

Humor can also be a coping strategy for some.[34] The Air Force even has some suggestions on the effective use of humor. It suggests, "Humor must be used properly to be effective."[35] The Air Force Manual (AFMAN) on Air Force instructions offers five essentials to using humor.

1. Know the Item Thoroughly.
2. Don't Use Off-Color Stories to Get a Cheap Laugh.
3. Vitalize Humor.
4. Don't Laugh Before the Audience Laughs.
5. Capitalize on the Unexpected.[36]

Humor is not unusual as people deal with stress, loss, grief, and adversity. There can be a lasting impact if a stressful situation is not taken lightly, but taken with a sense of humor.

Religion and Spirituality

Spiritual and religious traditions also provide some positive coping mechanisms. "Most religion and spirituality practices incorporate some form of prayer, meditation, or mindfulness. These practices have been used for thousands of years to quiet and discipline the mind."[37]

"Meditation, which for some is a spiritual practice, has also been found to be associated with better personal well-being."[38] How we use meditation can have a direct impact on social, physical, and mental health. One study found that, "The practice of loving-kindness meditation increased participants' reports of positive emotions, which in turn increased a variety of personal resources, including mindfulness, social support received, self-acceptance, and a sense of purpose in life."[39]

Conclusion

As we gain more positive coping strategies, we can eliminate other coping mechanisms that may prolong our stress or avoid it altogether. When we take the initiative to build these strategies we are advancing our resiliency when future adversity comes upon us. "We experience a sense of inner strength when we realize that we possess the resources to cope with whatever challenges life sends our way."[40]

A coping mechanism can be positive if it is contributing to healthy self-care. One way to determine if the actions being taken with the coping mechanism are efficacious to self-care is by placing it in the attached Self-Care Activity Matrix.

Ask for student perspectives, have a few identify their own current or desired positive coping mechanisms.

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34 Willoughby, "The Resilient Self—What Helps and What Hinders?" 90.
35 AFMAN 36-2236 13.5.4.1, 163.
36 AFMAN 36-2236, 13.5.4.1.1-13.5.4.5, 163.
37 Southwick, *Resilience*, 129.
38 Carr, *Positive Psychology*, 24.
39 Frederickson, "Cultivating Positive Emotions to Enhance Human Flourishing," 41.
40 Willoughby, "The Resilient Self," 96.

Part 2: Lesson Outline
Notes:

Restate objective.

End the series of lessons by emphasizing the need to practice the principles that have been shared.

Request feedback to improve personal teaching methods and better use of curriculum. Also request other topics that could be used in future lessons dealing with spiritual resiliency.

Self-Care Activity Matrix

Instructions: Fill out each box with at least one idea that fits the proper category. The more ideas you can include, the better you will be prepared when the time comes to address your self-care needs. Ask yourself, "What do I need right now?"

Activity Category	Solitary	With Another Person	No Cost	Low Cost	Medium to High Cost	30 seconds to 3 minutes	30 minutes to 3 hours	3 hours+	Other
Physical									
Spiritual									
Cultural									
Psychological									
Intellectual									
Social									
Mindful									
Other									

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