

Military and Veteran Family Resilience: The Power of Stories

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Learning Objectives

- Identify factors that influence resilience in military and veteran families.
- Understand how individual and family narratives help build family resilience.
- List important themes within personal and family narratives.
- Practice techniques to use in your own practice to build resilience through the act of storytelling.

Challenges of Military and Veteran Families

- Extended and repeated separations from a primary caregiver in the context of danger
- Altered family roles and responsibilities
- Increased stress on caretaking parent
- Impact of combat exposure on returning parent
- Reintegration of veteran into civilian life
- Shifting health care / navigating “the system”
- Possible mental health problems, physical injury, or loss
- Parenting while caretaking for injured/ill veteran
- Challenges to identify and purpose

Potential Impact of Parental PTSD and TBI on Children

Potential Impact of PTSD and TBI on Children

- Lack of understanding leads to misinterpretations
- Increased acting out behaviors and emotional distress
- Feelings of loss/grief about the change in the parent
- Feelings of embarrassment
- Self-blame for parent's irritability
- Feeling disconnected from family members

What is Resilience?



Mechanisms of Risk and Resilience

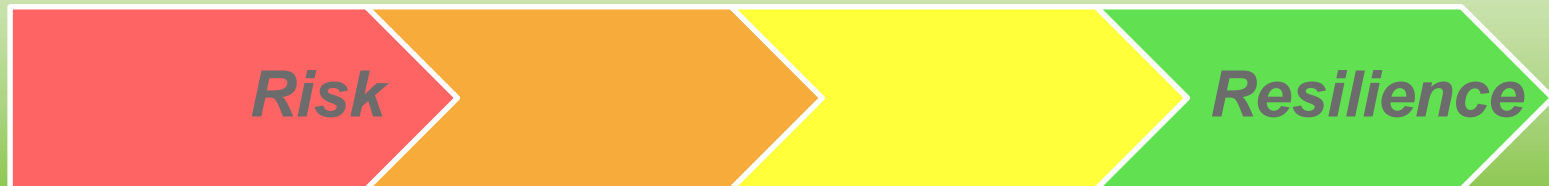
Saltzman, Lester, Beardslee, Layne, Woodward, & Nash, 2011

Risk

- Incomplete understanding of the impact of the stressor or trauma and inaccurate developmental expectations
- Impaired family communication; emotional numbing; avoidance; impaired family closeness
- Impaired parenting practices
- Impaired family organization
- Lack of guiding belief systems

Resilience

- Understanding the nature and cause of stressor; accurate psychoeducation about mental health; understanding developmental reactions to stress
- Enhancing awareness and understanding; open and emotionally resonant communication
- Supportive and responsive parenting; strong parent-child relationship
- Flexible family structure; balance strong leadership and the ability to maintain continuity in the face of adversity; capacity of accommodate to change
- Ability to make sense of an experience and endow it with meaning



Meaning Making and Helpful Beliefs

- Making meaning out of trauma and loss
 - Normalizes and contextualizes distress
 - Gain a sense of coherence as shared challenge: comprehensible, manageable, meaningful
- Positive Outlook
 - Hope and encouragement
 - Strength affirming
 - Build on potential and master the possible
 - Accept what can't be changed



Walsh, 2007

Meaning Making and Helpful Beliefs

- Transcendence and Spirituality
 - Faith
 - Rituals (e.g. prayer, meditation, ceremony)
 - Sense of purpose and meaningful bonds to others
 - Learning, growth, transformation
 - Appreciation
 - Activism and helping others



Walsh, 2007



*Exploring
the Value of
Narratives*

The Stories We Tell

“Everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

--Patrick Rothfuss, author

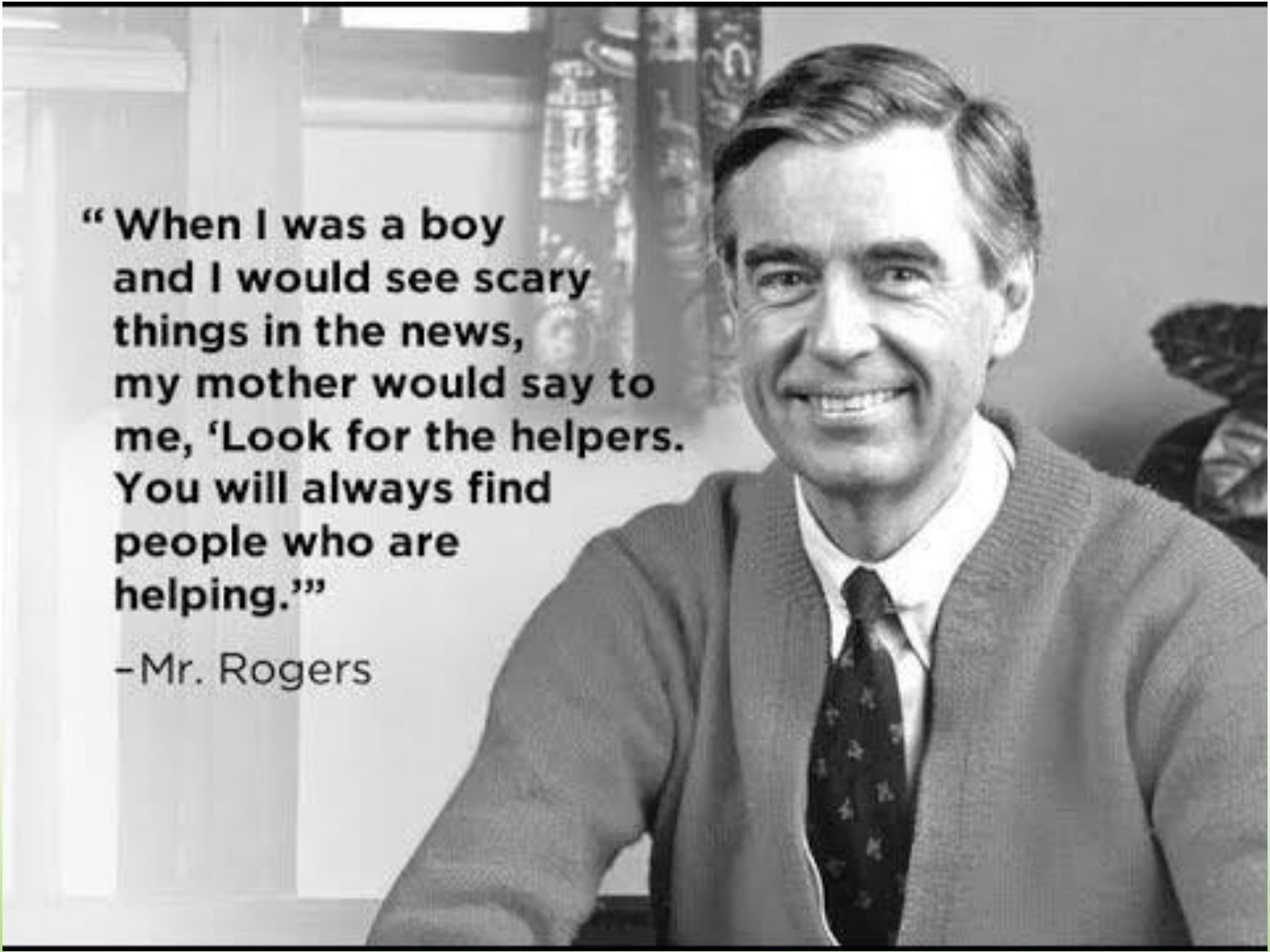


Narratives....

- are formed to create meaning and signification rather than preserve facts
- evolve over time
- Form in relationship with others and one's environment
- may be influenced by individual, family, community, cultural and spiritual meanings
- link past to present and possible futures

Positive Themes Within Narratives

- **Agency:** The degree to which one is able to affect change in their own lives or influence others
- **Redemption:** Scenes in which a “bad” or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably “good” or emotionally positive outcome.
- **Communion:** The degree to which one experiences interpersonal connection through love, friendship, dialogue, or connection to a broad collective



**“When I was a boy
and I would see scary
things in the news,
my mother would say to
me, ‘Look for the helpers.
You will always find
people who are
helping.’”**

-Mr. Rogers

The sense of mission that I have, it's not about myself. It's not about my career or nine to five job. It's about helping others. You know, whether it's my family, the community, or the Marines and sailors that work for me. You know, it's ...serving others. You're trying to help, trying to help look out for others, mentor them, help them grow along the way.

--U.S. Marine Corps Officer, FOCUS participant

Narrative Co-Construction: Telling Stories Together

- Adults (esp. parents) help children learn the process of assigning meaning to events and their own reactions
- Adults' ability to help children tell helpful stories relies on:
 - Their ability to regulate their own emotions
 - Use developmentally appropriate language
 - Track their child's reactions
 - Encourage two-way interaction (avoid lectures)



Facilitating Effective Sharing

- Open ended questions
 - “Mom, how was that time for you?”
 - “What was your experience Mary?”
- Adults can acknowledge, validate and praise
 - Sounds like you really did well in changing schools. Do you agree?”
 - Mom, you mentioned earlier you were really proud of your son during this time...”

Facilitating Effective Sharing

- Highlight positive communication:
 - “I want to stop for a minute and point out...”
 - “Dad, I think it’s really important what you said there. Can you repeat it?”
- Highlight shared challenges even if responses are different
 - “This was a challenging time for everyone.”

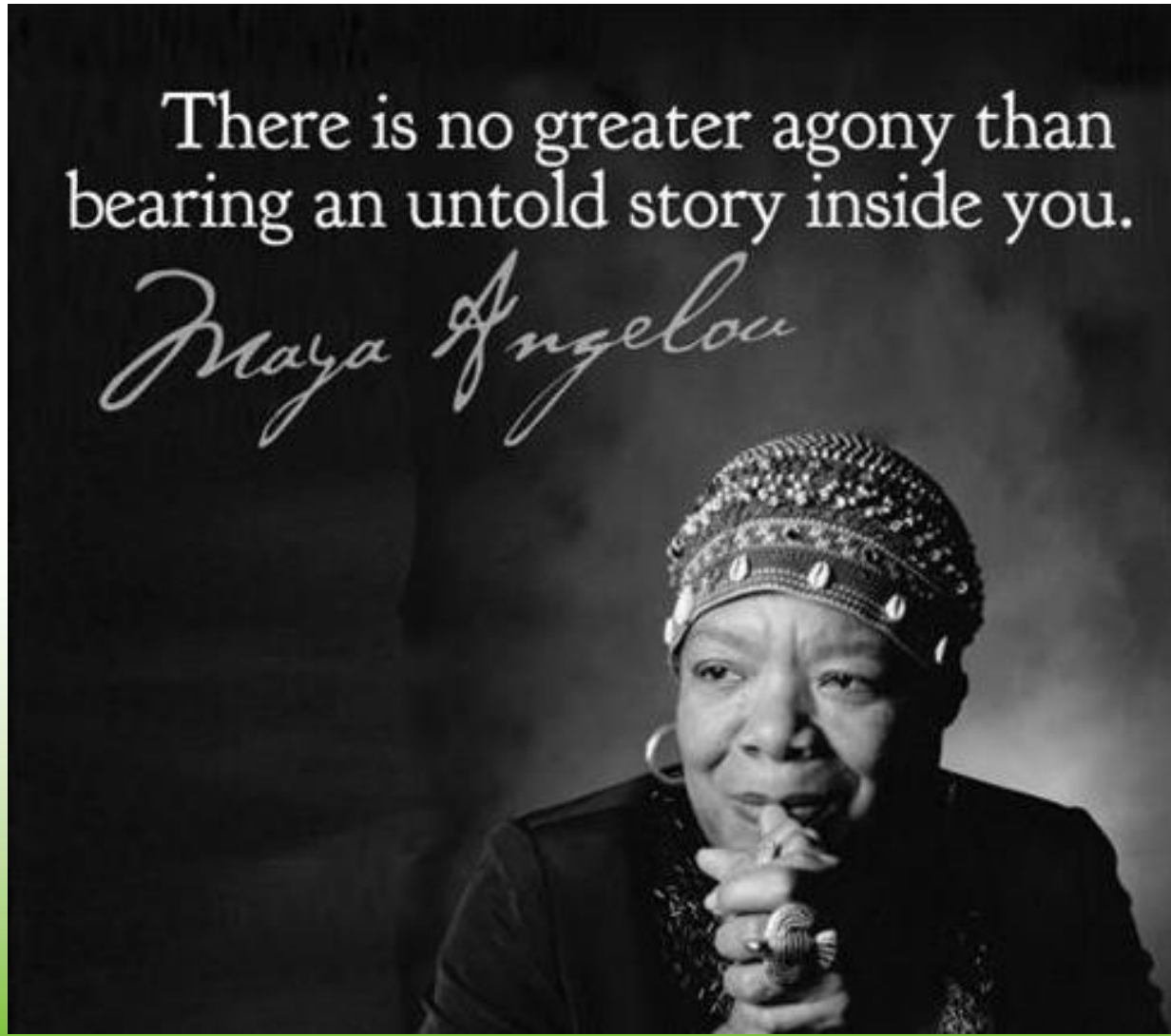
Facilitating Effective Sharing

- Explore adaptive responses:
 - “What did your family do that helped you get from calm down?”
 - What/Who helped you improve?”
- Offer alternative meanings if necessary
 - “Your family seems to bounce back when dealt a difficult challenge.”
 - “Talking about these things takes courage”

Story Telling

There is no greater agony than
bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou



Story Telling

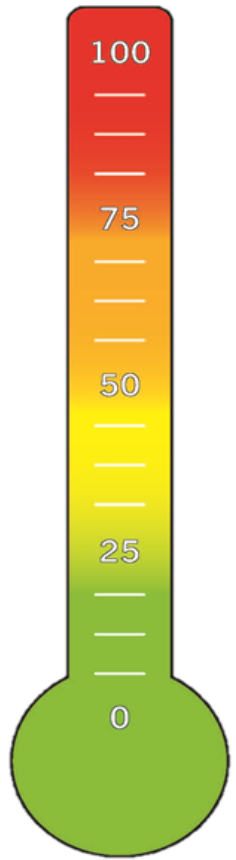
- Conversations
- Short Stories
- Collage
- Poetry
- Music
- Puppets
- Play
- Digital Storytelling
- YouTube
- Blogs
- Cartoons/Comic
- Timelines
- Speeches
- Others...?



Activity: Create Your Resilience Narrative

Create your own personal narrative timeline. We will guide you through the process!

Example Timeline for Narrative

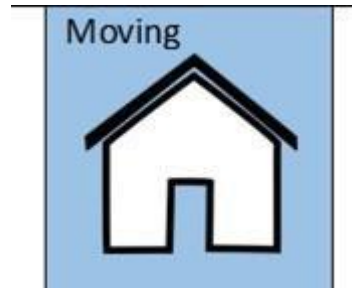


Time or Year >>>>

Now

Symbol Key

Moved to
New Home

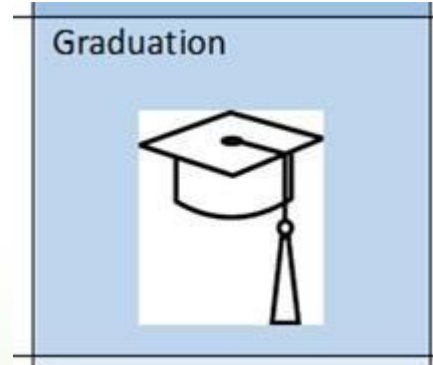


Difficult or Challenging Time

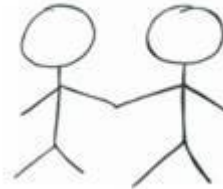


Challenges/
Difficulties

Graduation or
academic
achievement



Helped Another
Person or Group



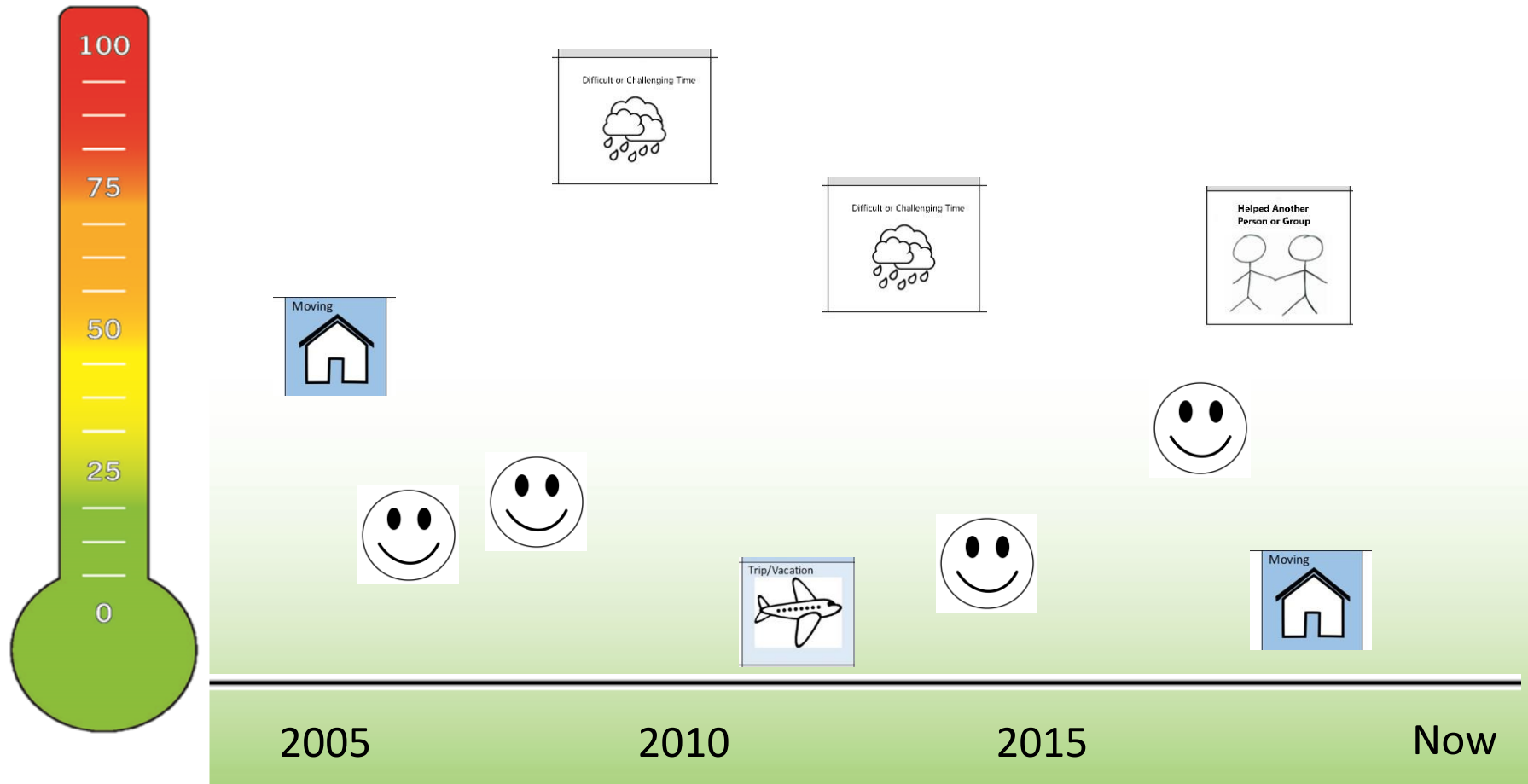
Helped Another
Person/Group

Trip or Vacation



New Friend
or mentor

Example Timeline for Narrative



Time for Reflection!

- Do you see any themes?
- What helped you be resilient in the face of challenges?
- Who/What helped you form positive stories about yourself?



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Thank you!

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