



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Paul" • Resilience

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Fr. Paul is a diocesan priest who was treated at Saint Luke Institute for panic attacks, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) stemming from early childhood sexual abuse. The panic attacks, brought on by perfectionism, overworking and memories of childhood trauma, had a serious impact on his daily life.

Fr. Paul's panic attacks were especially debilitating while presiding at Mass. His symptoms of severe sweating and trembling made his whole body shake so that he could no longer preside. He experienced a sense of terror, impending doom, a feeling of physical weakness and a loss of control. Over time, these panic attacks, along with his worsening depression and PTSD symptoms, reduced his capacity to "bounce back" in response to life stressors. He was losing the internal resource of resilience.

Defining Resilience

Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. It can also be understood as the process of adapting well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or stress. Resilience involves maintaining mental flexibility and emotional balance in dealing with stressful circumstances. Resilient individuals have the freedom to seek support from others and to rely on themselves. They have the mental flexibility to step forward to take action to deal with trauma, stress, and daily demands, or to step back to rest, reflect and re-energize. The ongoing process of cultivating resilience takes time and effort.

There are several interpersonal skills one can develop that are associated with resilience. These include the capacity to clarify realistic plans and take the necessary steps to carry them out, a positive and confident view of self, the skills to communicate and problem solve, and the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses.

Fr. Paul, like most people, had the capacity to rebuild his life after a traumatic experience-he just did not know how. Although emotional distress and pain are common, the behaviors, thoughts and actions that constitute the process of resilience can be learned, developed and enhanced. What Fr. Paul lacked was a supportive environment in which to address the unresolved feelings, thoughts and fears that greatly challenged his ability to be resilient. Research shows that most people are more resilient than they previously believed was possible. This ability to bounce back from difficult experiences is a topic of much research in the psychological literature and is a major factor in the recovery process at Saint Luke Institute.

Developing Resilience

During his six-month treatment at St. Luke Institute, Fr. Paul's anxiety, fears, and other symptoms gradually subsided. He learned to question the negative thoughts about himself, and to replace these thoughts with more realistic ones. He began to gain the resilient qualities of hardiness and self-confidence. He also began to reach out to others for friendship and emotional support and no longer felt that he was struggling alone with insurmountable challenges. He learned skills to reduce the frequency and intensity of his panic attacks, and he was able to resume presiding at Mass. When it was time for Fr. Paul to leave SLI, he stated that he felt "ready to face the world" again.

Through the therapeutic treatment program at Saint Luke Institute, Fr. Paul's development of resilience was directly related to having an intimate network of caring relationships. During the Continuing Care program, his support group members were faithful and encouraging and helped to bolster his resilience through regular meetings and individual contact with him. Over the course of his Continuing Care program, Father Paul established a strong relationship with his spiritual director and developed a rich prayer life, which deepened his sense that he was not alone.

The experience and skills that he learned helped Fr. Paul to adapt and adjust to life's circumstances. His efforts toward becoming resilient indicated how much he wanted to heal and how much he was willing to overcome obstacles to heal. Over time, developing awareness of his strengths, seeing things in a longterm perspective and maintaining an optimistic outlook became the foundation of his healthy recovery. Through the experience of residential treatment and the Continuing Care program, he learned that getting help when needed is crucial in building resilience. Beyond caring families and friends, he learned to turn to his support group and the resources of a licensed mental health professional. Ultimately, Fr. Paul realized that he was stronger and more resilient than he had believed was possible. Through the development of resilience Fr. Paul gained the extraordinary gift of a healthy life.

Looking for Help

Individuals who want to further develop inner resilience can also find resources in their communities to assist them. Self-help groups in community and church settings can create a network of support for those struggling with hardships such as grieving the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, a serious illness, and other traumatic events. Group participants help each other by sharing feelings and emotions and receive comfort in knowing that one is not alone in difficult times. Seeing a spiritual director regularly can help to develop one's spiritual resources, which make a significant contribution to resilience. Books, publications and online resources such as the APA Help Center at www.apahelpcenter.org also offer support. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist or a licensed clinical social worker can assist individuals in developing their capacity to be resilient. Getting professional help is vital if one is unable to function in daily life as a result of a traumatic experience or loss.

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