

DEFINING, AND DEVELOPING, FAMILY RESILIENCE



HOMEFRONT
CONSTANCE
JOHANNESSEN

He arrived from Norway as a young man, knowing no one. As the years passed, his bride from Oslo, his parents and brother ventured to the United States to be with him. His family expanded with the birth of five children.

At 83 years old, dressed in his red bow tie, on Christmas Day he sits in his European-styled home with his family, now 28 in all. In the Norwegian tradition, he begins the event with a speech. He talks warmly of his wife of 60 years, and credits her with keeping him going, realizing that without her constant care, he might not be here at all.

He describes her daily care of him: cleaning, dressing him, and preparing meals. Over and over again he remarks that she never complains. She sits next to him, humbled by his appreciation. She is not a martyr; she is someone who continues to love her husband's companionship, even through daily physical challenges.

Like other families, this one has dealt with cancer, divorce, unemployment, loss and other changes. In fact, all of these issues were prevalent that day. As we all deal with harsh economic times, high unemployment and sparse health benefits, it is natural that we look to our families for strength and refuge.

What differentiates one family's ability to manage the dark and challenging side of life, while another family splinters? Over the years, I have found that a family's resilience and propensity to weather life's storms is based on many interactive characteristics. The first is loyalty and commitment. Loyalty is the glue that binds the membership. Central to loyalty, is the genuine, mutual, authentic care amongst family members. Families who are loyal and truly care for each other create a cushion.

Times of trial call for family members to assess their resources. Larger families typically have members who can offer more diverse skills and resources. This allows for bartering or exchange of services for payment, creating an opportunity for economic balance. A standard rule of thumb is: do not give hand-outs, give jobs. Family members are sensitive to being in

a plight and want to sustain their pride. Family members are usually more comfortable earning their way and feeling responsible.

"How to be helpful" can sometimes be difficult to define, even when the losses or changes are blatant. For example, when a senior member in a family begins to lose his or her memory. "What can be done?" is often the question by many family members. Frequently, the person with memory loss denies the extent of the problem, and obstructs assistance. Immediate family experiences pressure to enlist medical help despite the senior member's resistance.

Resilient families do not shy away from problems, they confront them. Granted, this is not always a smooth process. During rough times, family members may experience extreme stress and at times be at their worst behavior. People may be angry, and out of line. Most families are not like the Waltons, or Ingalls from "Little House on the Prairie," they are real people, with real foibles. To deal with this, every family needs a level of tolerance for poor behavior. By working together to confront problems, resilient families find plausible solutions. For example, it is common that when a family member separates from their partner, they are more irritable than usual. While assisting them through multiple divorce-related tasks, and trying to help them do what is in their best interest, a family member may need to tolerate the natural anger they experience and express.

Members of a close-knit family often hold the belief that they can care for "their own." And, often they do. If the needed resources are not available within their immediate network, they guide family members toward finding help outside of their system.

Families who have stayed together throughout the years, and endured many hurdles, have learned the art of recognizing and nurturing each member's gifts and potential. They hold respect for their journey together.

Dr. Constance Johannessen, a licensed psychologist in New Hampshire and Maine, has practiced for more than 20 years and specializes in couples, individual and group therapy. She is with Woodland Professional Associates of North Hampton.

COMMUNITY