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THE WHY

“

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

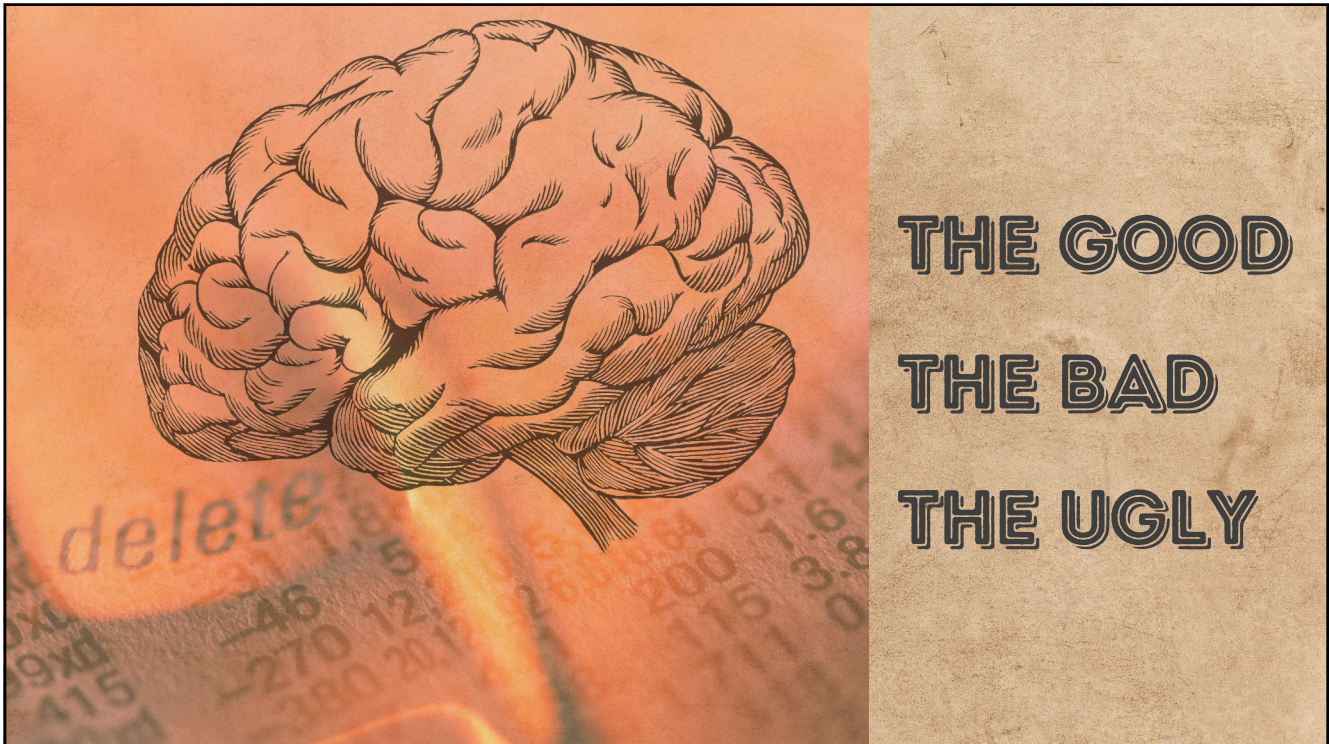
-Maya Angelou



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If you met
My Family
YOU WOULD
UNDERSTAND

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ANNA'S STORY

Anna grew up in a small town where her family had lived for generations. For as long as she could remember, chaos was the rhythm of life in her home. Her father was a good man in brief, fleeting moments, but alcohol made him unpredictable. On bad nights, the yelling and violence between her parents filled the house, echoing through the walls. Her mother, despite being caring, was often emotionally unavailable, trapped in her own history of trauma and depression. Anna, the oldest of three siblings, took on the role of caregiver from a young age—cooking meals, helping with homework, and shielding her younger siblings from the worst of their parents' fights.



This life was all Anna knew. Her grandparents had lived through similar turmoil—her father often told stories of his own abusive upbringing, almost as if excusing his behavior. The dysfunction in Anna's family was a pattern: unspoken but ever-present, passed down like an heirloom. By the time Anna reached high school, she had also begun to believe this was just her destiny.

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THE WHO

Who is a cycle breaker?

- Disrupters of negative or harmful patterns
- Awareness of Dysfunction
- Intentional Choice to Change
- Focus on Future Generations



Bowen, M. (1993). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Jason Aronson.

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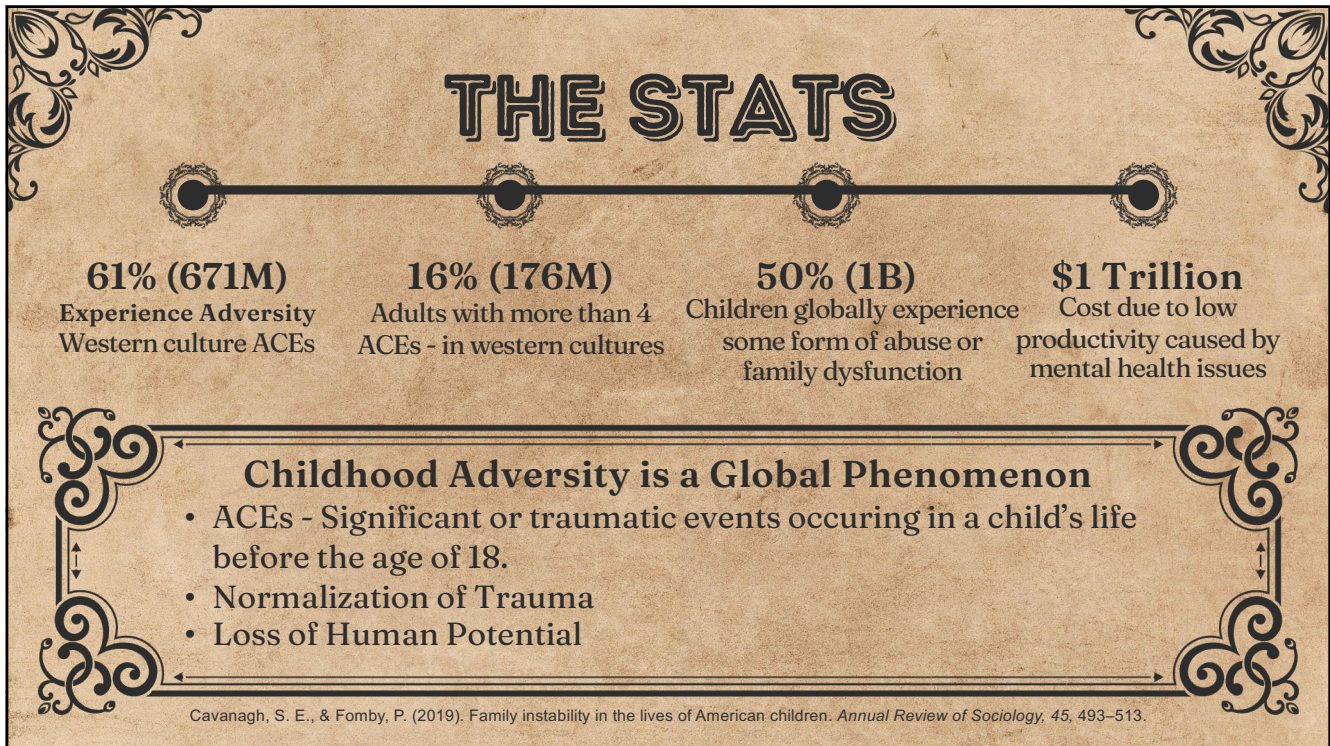
20% - 30%

It's estimated that 20-30% of individuals who grew up in environments with significant dysfunction manage to break the cycle.

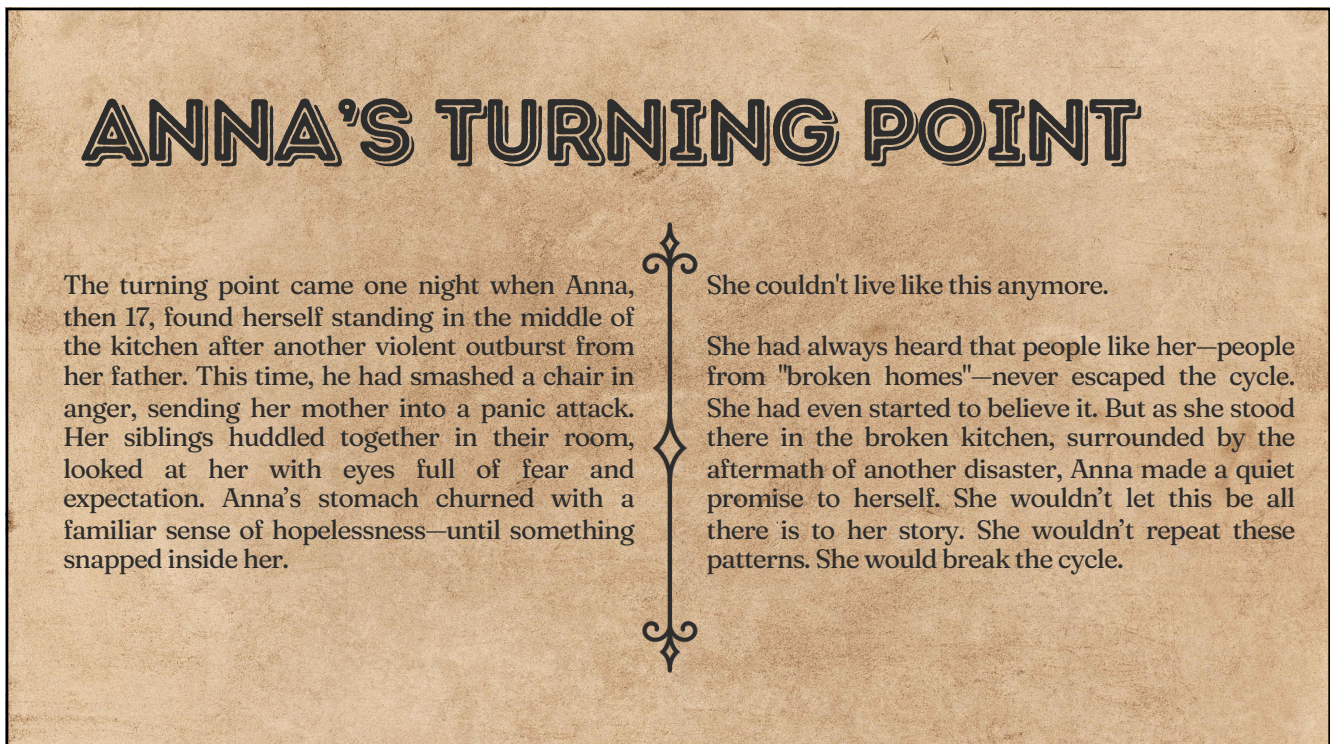
This leaves a substantial portion of the adult population still grappling with the effects of these cycles.

Hamby, S., Grych, J., & Banyard, V. (2018). Resilience portfolios and poly-strengths: Identifying protective factors associated with thriving after adversity. *Psychology of Violence*, 8(2), 172-183.

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3 - THE WHAT

What sets Cycle Breakers apart?



Intrinsic Qualities

- Resilience
- Self-efficacy
- Identity Formation



External Factors

- Social Support Systems
- Community Resources
- Culture



Coping Mechanisms

- Problem-focused
- Emotion-focused
- Avoidance-based

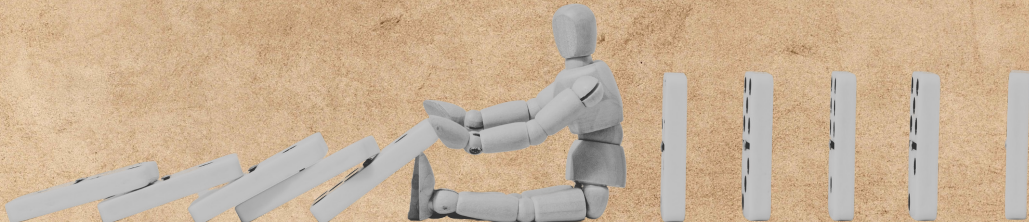
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RESILIENCE

What is this really?


- Ordinary Magic (protective factors)
- Attachment Theory
- Evolution of Resilience

Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.




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CULTURE



Support
Identifying and reinforcing the need to differentiate from adversity.



Pressure
Certain cultures heavily emphasize family loyalty, and isolation occurs.



Intersectionality
Multiple identities to satisfy - race, gender, socioeconomics - complicates cycle breaking.

Walsh, F. (2012). Family Resilience: Strengths Forged through Adversity. In F. Walsh (Ed.), Normal Family Processes (pp. 399-427). New York: Guildford Press.




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COPING

Problem-focused
Addressing the sources of stress and conflict and involves practical steps such as planning, time management, seeking information, or negotiating solutions.

Emotion-focused
Aimed at managing the emotional responses to stress and involves techniques that help individuals regulate their emotions, reduce emotional distress, and maintain psychological equilibrium

Avoidance-based
Respond to stress by distancing themselves from the problem, either mentally or physically, and is characterized by denial, disengagement, procrastination, or substance use.

Adaptive
Essential for Cycle Breakers
Healthy and constructive methods

Adaptive/Maladaptive
Some coping can be adaptive initially but become problematic in the long run. Using coping tools in excess (like exercise).

Maladaptive
Linked to severe psychological distress
Using unhealthy methods to cope which typically will lead to more problems than solutions.

Solberg MA, Gridley MK, Peters RM. The Factor Structure of the Brief Cope: A Systematic Review. West J Nurs Res. 2022 Jun;44(6):612-627.

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ANNA'S STRUGGLES



The road to breaking the cycle wasn't immediate or easy. At first, Anna didn't even know what it meant to live differently. College seemed out of reach—no one in her family had ever gone, and she had no idea how to apply. She was barely passing her classes because of the constant stress at home.

Her high school guidance counselor noticed Anna's potential and offered her a lifeline. She said, "Your past doesn't have to define your future," and this phrase stuck with her through the hard times.

Therapy became Anna's first step toward understanding that her childhood had left scars—but those scars didn't have to determine her future.

Still, even after leaving for college, the weight of her past followed her. Anna struggled with feelings of unworthiness. She dated men who reminded her of her father, and she battled with anxiety and the fear that she would repeat her parents' mistakes. There were nights when the old patterns threatened to pull her under.

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THE WHEN

When do these needs for breaking the cycles begin?



Theoretical Frameworks

Family Systems Theory



Ecological Systems Theory
(Bioecological Model)



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FAMILY SYSTEMS

Interdependence

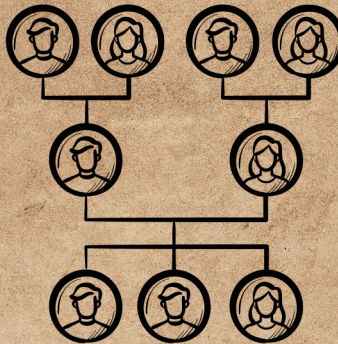
Families are emotional systems where each member's behavior impacts others.

Generational Transmission

Emotional and behavioral patterns (e.g., anxiety, conflict avoidance) are passed down. Unhealthy roles (e.g., scapegoat, rescuer) repeat across generations.

Triangles

When two members are in conflict, a third person is often pulled in, leading to unbalanced dynamics that perpetuate dysfunction.



Emotional System

The family operates as an emotional unit, where emotions flow through relationships and affect each member.

Family Projection

This is the process by which parents transfer their emotional issues or anxieties onto their children.

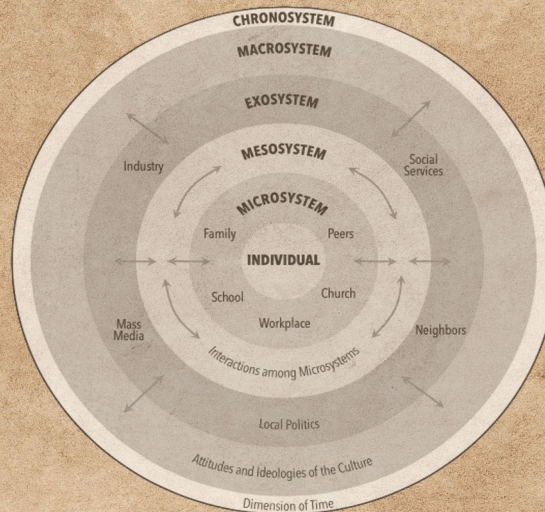
Differentiation of Self

The ability of an individual to separate their own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of their family system.

Calatrava M, Martins MV, Schweer-Collins M, Duch-Ceballos C, Rodríguez-González M. Differentiation of self: A scoping review of Bowen Family Systems Theory's core construct. Clin Psychol Rev. 2022 Feb;91:102101.

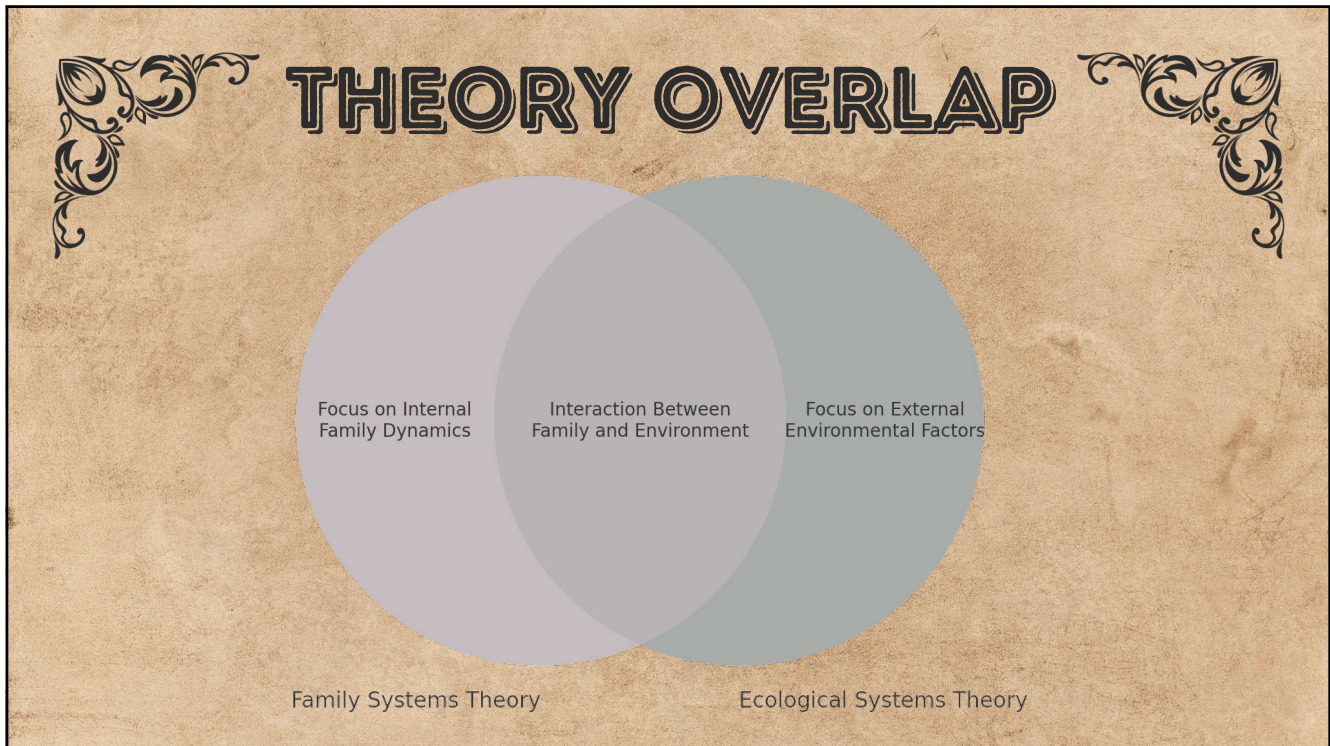
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ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS



Crawford, Marcus. (2020). Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Conceived by Bronfenbrenner Article Details. Journal of Public Health Issues and Practices. 4. 170.

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ANNA'S TRANSFORMATION

The real transformation came when Anna, now 25 and working as a social worker, was assigned a client who reminded her painfully of her younger self. A little boy lived in a home full of yelling, fear, and unpredictability. His file said he was “troubled,” but Anna saw more than that.

She saw the same quiet resilience in his eyes that she had once seen in the mirror.

Anna allowed herself to believe in her strength for the first time. She wasn't just surviving anymore—she was thriving. She took a deep breath and began to envision a future that didn't look like her parents' or grandparents' lives—a future where she would have a family, but one built on love, support, and emotional safety. She accepted her whole truth.

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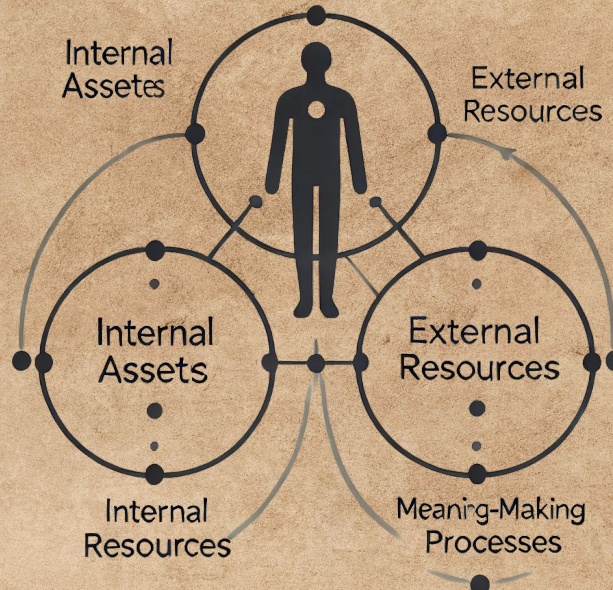


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TOOLS FOR YOU Use Screening Assessments		
Tool	Purpose	Age Group
ACE Questionnaire	Screens for childhood trauma	Adults, Adolescents
BRIEF RESILIENCE SCALE (BRS)	Measures resilience	Adolescents, Adults (12+)
Brief COPE	Assesses coping strategies	Adolescents, Adults (12+)
Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)	Measures perceived stress	Adolescents, Adults (12+)
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Screens for emotional/behavioral problems	Children, Adolescents (4-17)
Brief Trauma Questionnaire (BTQ)	Screens for trauma exposure	Adolescents, Adults (16+)
Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	Assesses perceived social support	Adolescents, Adults (12+)
Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)	Screens for psychological distress	Adolescents, Adults (12+)

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RESILIENCE PORTFOLIO MODEL



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HOW TO USE THE MODEL

Holistic Understanding

Multidimensional view of resilience - all resources, not just their internal strengths.

Focus on Strengths

Moving beyond all of the risk factors and highlighting what they are doing well.

Create a Portfolio Together

Use assessment tools that explore a client's internal assets, external resources (e.g., social support, and meaning-making processes (e.g., values, beliefs, spirituality).

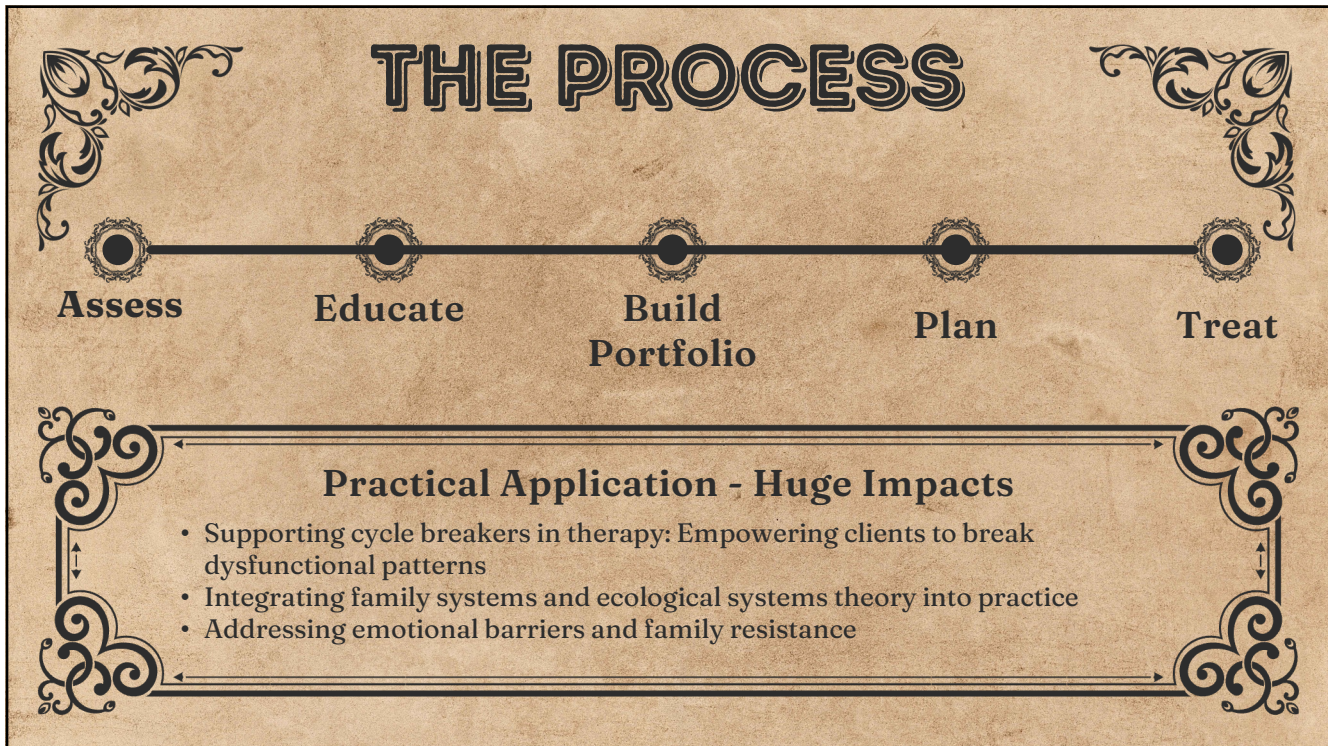
Personalized Resilience Plan

Use the model to create a personalized resilience plan that addresses all three areas of the client's portfolio.

Framework for Intervention

By targeting each component of the model—internal, external, and meaning-making processes—counselors can help clients strengthen their overall resilience and coping abilities.

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THE RESULTS

Cycle breakers courageously and intentionally disrupt negative generational cycles. They accept their roots and represent transformation, resilience, and the capacity to redefine family legacies.

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“Family pathology rolls from generation to generation like a fire in the woods taking down everything in its path until one person, in one generation, has the courage to turn and face the flames. That person brings peace to his ancestors and spares the children that follow.”

Terry Real [Book - “Us”]

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