

# A LEADER'S GUIDE TO

# THE STRUGGLE TO BE STRONG

UPDATED EDITION

## How to Foster Resilience in Teens

Sybil Wolin, Ph.D.

Al Desetta, M.A.

Keith Hefner of Youth Communication

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**Edited by Bonnie Zucker Goldsmith**

**free spirit**  
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# RESILIENCE

## A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

Working with teens can be intensely challenging, particularly when many classrooms and youth groups include kids who have gone through trauma or hardship. As a committed teacher or youth worker, you may sometimes feel overwhelmed by the problems you see.

This guide offers suggestions to help you focus your energy where you can be most effective. You probably have little or no immediate control over the environments or personal challenges of the kids you work with—you can't change their neighborhoods, their families, or their personalities. But you can foster the resilience young people need to persist in the face of challenges. This guide and *The Struggle to Be Strong* can help you find a satisfying and productive middle ground between giving up on teens' problems and feeling like you have to solve them.

In many of the stories, the writers grapple with typical coming-of-age issues, such as dating, body image, friendships, and peer pressure. In others, the writers describe serious adversity, such as disrupted families, abuse, or the death of a parent. Some recall the tangible success of graduating from high school or kicking a drug habit. Others explain their continuing struggle to overcome the obstacles in their way; their ability to persevere is their success.

These are important issues—friendship, loss, self-image, peer pressure—for people of any age. When young people reflect on these issues as described by their peers, they may discover strengths they didn't know they had. They may be motivated to make changes in their own lives.

Resilience, then, is the theme that unites the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong*. As you and the teens in your group work with these stories, you help them discover and develop their own resilience. Together, the stories in the anthology and the activities in this guide are a powerful, strengths-based way to engage and inspire the young people you work with.

### Seven Resiliencies

Hardship and suffering are inescapable facts of life. Everyone suffers disappointments, losses, rejections, and setbacks. Everyone experiences the death of loved ones. Fortunately, more people respond to hardship with resilience—persistence in the face of adversity—than with collapse.

In 2000, when *The Struggle to Be Strong* and this leader's guide were first published, resilience wasn't a new or rare concept. Resilience is part of being human, and everyone is resilient to one degree or another. The new research at the time was the attempt to pinpoint the aspects of resilience that enable some people to survive adversity better than others, and to translate resilience theory into a strengths-based teaching approach.

Nearly twenty years later, the precise meaning of resilience is still slippery. Some have defined resilience as “success against the odds.” Others have called it a trait, a capacity, or an approach. In this guide, resilience is defined as persistence in the face of adversity, persistence made possible by specific behaviors that can be named, discussed, and learned.

The stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* are organized into sections that correspond to seven resiliencies. Think of these resiliencies as a kind of mental map to help you know where to look for strengths in the young people you work with. The seven resiliencies, defined as behaviors, are:

- Insight—asking tough questions
- Independence—being your own person
- Relationships—connecting with people who matter
- Initiative—taking charge
- Creativity—using imagination
- Humor—finding what's funny
- Morality—doing the right thing

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## Insight

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Insight is the habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers. People with insight see themselves and their circumstances clearly and realistically. They don't avoid difficult or painful truths. They take responsibility for themselves, instead of blaming others for their troubles. Insight is a resilience because it helps people see things as they really are, not as they wish things would be.

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## Independence

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Independence is being one's own person by keeping a safe physical, psychological, or emotional distance from the pressures of family, friends, and circumstances. People with independence stand back and make conscious, thoughtful decisions based on what's best for them—even when that means breaking or limiting connections with important people in their lives. Independence is a resilience because it helps people feel safe knowing they can rely on themselves.

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## Relationships

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Relationships are intimate and fulfilling ties to people who matter. These connections are based on sharing, mutual respect, and openness. People who form lasting relationships learn to balance giving and taking, helping and being helped. They take the risk of trusting others. Relationships are a resilience because they provide a sense of belonging, give opportunities for self-expression, and offer support, understanding, friendship, and sometimes love.

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## Initiative

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Initiative is taking charge and tackling difficulties head-on. People with initiative don't see themselves as helpless victims; rather, they see their problems as challenges they can overcome. They plan, set goals, and take action. Initiative is a resilience because it helps people make a difference in their lives.

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## Creativity

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Creativity is using one's imagination to express oneself and to handle hurt feelings and difficult experiences. People with creativity use their imagination as a safe haven from feelings that seem overwhelming. They channel their feelings in positive, satisfying ways: through art, invention, performance, daydreaming, and so forth. Creativity is a resilience because it helps people manage difficult feelings.

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## Humor

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Humor is finding what's funny in situations that seem sad, tragic, stressful, or embarrassing. People with humor avoid taking themselves and their problems too seriously. They have perspective, seeing their personal troubles in a larger context. Humor is a resilience because it helps people release tension and relieve pain.

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## Morality

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Morality is doing the right thing, even if it's not easy or natural. People with morality see what others need and try to give it to them, even when that means sacrificing their own best or short-term interests. They connect with other people by remembering and doing what's decent and fair. Morality is a resilience because it creates an inner sense of goodness and keeps people from becoming cynical or giving up on the world.

For a handy summary of the seven resiliencies, see pages 161–164 in the anthology.

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## Resilience as Paradox

Each of the seven resiliencies can be found in people who have struggled with hardship. No one emerges from tough circumstances unhurt, but few people are completely destroyed by them. The stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* show the paradox of vulnerability and strength in the same person at the same time. For instance, Paula Byrd, in "How I Made Peace with the Past," is angry at her mother and wounded by her rejection. She is also forgiving and compassionate toward

her mother. In “Why I Live in a Fantasy World,” Cassandra Thadal worries that she spends too much time daydreaming and fantasizing. She also takes great pleasure in her imagination and uses it to help solve her problems.

Seeing resilience as a paradox will enable you to look for strengths in even the most troubled young people and to encourage them to search for examples of their own competence. Your understanding that everyone has strengths communicates an optimism that can rub off on teens and be a starting point for constructive change. The seven resiliencies are strong, self-protective behaviors that can serve as a framework for identifying the strengths (or potential strengths) in the young people you work with, no matter what their problems or circumstances might be.

You show that you take those strengths seriously by giving them names and explaining what they involve and how they help. Referring to these seven resiliencies—talking about strengths—in your group sessions will encourage teens to begin building on what they’ve got. Reflecting on the components of insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality allows teens to see themselves less as victims by enabling them to reframe painful events in their past to include the persistence and strengths they used to survive.

## Reframing

Reframing is viewing an old story from a new perspective. Teens or adults, we all tell ourselves stories about our lives. The stories are never simply collections of facts. They’re subjective. We choose what to omit, what to include, and what to make central. Because our life stories are subjective, we can reframe them. The purpose of reframing is to transform destructive stories into constructive ones. Reframing gives people a new way to look at their past. For instance, a story about abuse could be told this way:

“I was helpless as a child. I was a victim of my father’s abuse. He damaged me forever. Now I can’t do anything right or ever trust anyone again.”

Telling the story this way causes considerable pain and can get in the way of a productive life. But there’s another way to frame the same story:

“As a child, I was abused. But I was shrewd and used my wits to escape the worst that my father dished out. I’ve always had the ability to watch out for myself. Today, that skill is one of my greatest strengths.”

Telling the story this way centers the plot on the person’s pride, bravery, resourcefulness, and determination.

You can use the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* not only to help teens see the power of their own stories, but also to emphasize the difference between destructive stories and constructive ones. Use the names of the seven resiliencies to identify and describe the strengths shown by the teen writers and to encourage your group to search for similar strengths in themselves. Point out how people who may once have seen themselves as “bad,” “helpless,” or “damaged” were really quite capable and resilient. By doing so, you invite teens to see themselves in a new light and to reframe their own stories in a way that helps them realize the best in themselves.

## Resilience as Reality, Not Fairy Tale

All around us, resilience is confused with dramatic success. Too often, the media feature “superkids”—young adults who grew up in unspeakable circumstances and have defied the odds by achieving dazzling success. These stories make resilience seem like an almost magical process in which problems are simply conquered, once and for all. Typically, the stories downplay the struggle and ignore the pain that may linger, even in successful adulthood.

These kinds of stories are caricatures. They may comfort people who are far removed from the difficult situations facing young people, but they don’t help teens who are faced with real challenges. The stories of “superkids” can also demoralize teachers and youth workers, whose successes with teens are not nearly so stunning or complete.



Defining resilience as persistence in the face of adversity avoids the pitfall of associating resilience strictly with success. For many young people, “success” in school, work, and personal life may be a distant dream. They need resilience if they are to eventually achieve that dream, and they need models to show them why and how they should continue to struggle toward it. They need to know that we appreciate what they’re going through and respect them for their efforts, whether or not they achieve success as measured by others.

As mentioned earlier, defining resilience as behavioral (that is, something one can learn) and paradoxical (something that includes both pain and pride) allows you as leader to focus on young people’s struggles while still honoring their victories. Sometimes success in these stories is obvious, even dramatic—some of the teen writers graduate from high school despite great obstacles, give up a drug or alcohol habit, or read their poetry to an audience for the first time. But for others, success is less clear-cut: To succeed means to maintain hope, courage, and the determination to persevere.

Look, for instance, at Tamecka Crawford, the author of “A Love Too Strong.” Tamecka’s trust has been betrayed again and again by the adults in her life. She responds by withdrawing from people. Convinced that a social worker in her group home has taken a special interest in her, Tamecka takes the risk of dropping her guard and forming a relationship. When the social worker is transferred, Tamecka is devastated. But she wrestles down her pain and by the end of the story seems ready to risk forming a relationship again. Your students can discuss what strengths Tamecka will need in the future to form satisfying relationships.

What stands out in Tamecka’s story and in most of the other stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* is the writers’ complex and messy struggle—the efforts these kids make to keep going and how they work to bring self-defeating feelings under control. Because the stories are real in this way—because they reflect the conflicts, contradictions, and hard work of resilience—they can help you reach teens whose lives are filled with challenges and work with them to build their strengths.

# GUIDELINES FOR GROUP LEADERSHIP

## PROVIDING A SAFE PLACE

One consistent finding in resilience research is that caring adults are critically important in helping young people get through difficult times. The research shows that teens who have overcome hardship rarely describe a savior who solves their problems or rescues them. Rather, they say adults help by conveying that teens matter, validating their strengths, acknowledging their struggles, and showing them reasons to be hopeful.<sup>1</sup>

Discussing the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* is a powerful way to convey to teens that they matter. Because the stories are by teens, each honors the competence, experience, and talent of teens. The stories say that teens know things worth hearing. The stories touch on issues that concern teens deeply but that often estrange them from adults, such as family relationships and disruption, peer pressure, sexuality, the use of alcohol and other drugs, and racial identity. By facilitating discussion of these issues, you show your group that you're authentically interested in them and that you're open to hearing what they have to say, even on sensitive topics.

### Other People's Stories: A Safe Starting Point

The stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong*—because they are other people's stories—allow for the personal distance teens need to consider important issues and relate them to their own lives. The stories hit close to home, but not too close. The teens who wrote them are, in effect, confiding personal aspects of their lives to your group. They're acknowledging their problems, but they've cast those problems in a narrative form that took a lot of thought and time.

These teen authors have considered not only their problems but also how they've dealt with the problems, how they felt, and how various experiences changed them. The stories share

complicated reflections that involve actions, memories, feelings, reactions, and the power of hindsight. Talking about these stories is a way for your group members to explore issues in their own lives at a safe distance.

For example, when you discuss Jamel A. Salter's story, "Losing My Friends to Weed," discussion can range widely over Jamel's choices and behavior without making teens feel pressured to reveal their own experiences with drugs or peer conflicts. When you consider Artiqua S. Steed's story, "I'm Black, He's Puerto Rican . . . So What?" teens can reflect on the pressures Artiqua felt to break off an important relationship without necessarily confiding their own views about interracial dating.

The stories can also be a bridge between you and your group members because they offer a way for you to listen to their deepest concerns. When you show teens that you're willing to listen to them, you may be amazed (or even somewhat unnerved) at what they'll share with you. You'll find students coping with intense peer pressure or pressure from parents who are trying to live through their kids' achievements. You'll find young people who long for parents to pay attention to them or who are in abusive relationships. You'll find teens burdened by secrets, such as family members with drinking or mental health problems.

In more distressed neighborhoods, you'll typically find higher frequencies of abuse, of families that have spun out of control due to unemployment, drugs, or ill health. You'll find more kids who are in foster care or not living with parents. In many communities you'll find kids who are struggling with language and immigration issues.

In many classrooms and youth programs, the conditions troubling teens are an unacknowledged backdrop to the "real work" of education, enrichment, recreation, and so on. For young people, however, these issues are not a backdrop—they

1. See, for example, Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Vulnerable but Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982; New York: Adams, Banister, Cox, 1989); and Gina O'Connell Higgins, *Resilient Adults: Overcoming a Cruel Past* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

are front and center. Teens think about them all the time. They hamper academic work. They disrupt effective participation in group activities.

The stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* provide a way for you to engage the teens you work with in issues that are central to their lives. They give you a window into what teens are thinking and feeling, and they can help teens open up.

You can tap the full potential of *The Struggle to Be Strong* by providing a safe place where the stories can be discussed. Your group will feel safe if you:

- establish group guidelines
- offer respect
- acknowledge pain, but talk about strengths

## Establish Group Guidelines

Clear group guidelines provide a set of shared understandings about the way group sessions will be run. They let your group know what to expect from you and from each other. By giving sessions structure and predictability, guidelines help group members feel safe. As a result, teens will be more willing to participate and to benefit from the stories and related activities.

You, your school, or your agency may already have guidelines in place for class or group discussions. If so, before beginning work on the first story, make sure everyone understands the guidelines and agrees with them. If not, you might want to discuss these general guidelines with your group:

- Group members listen to and respect each other.
- Everyone is welcome to share thoughts and feelings, but no one has to share.
- Everyone in the group should feel valued and accepted. All points of view are welcome. There are no “wrong” answers.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality can be important in establishing a safe environment for learning and discussion. You may want to ask teens not to share information outside the group. However, depending on your setting, expectations about maintaining

confidentiality can vary. As a leader, you should know where you stand on this issue and what’s realistic to expect in your environment. In a classroom setting, confidentiality rules can be almost impossible to enforce, while in more intimate, quasitherapeutic settings, such as family groups, support groups, or 12-step programs, they’re more likely to be heeded. In general, you’ll find that teens will know how much to reveal about themselves during discussion and in writing.

Be aware that reading and discussing personal stories by their peers raises the likelihood that teens in your group will reveal significant issues in their lives. For the most part, frank and open discussion of these realities can help spur personal growth and change. If you have concerns about maintaining confidentiality in your group, consult your colleagues or supervisor for advice.

## Handling Sensitive Issues

Several of the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* deal with sensitive emotional issues such as drug abuse, parental neglect, and depression. Your group may reveal very personal connections to these issues in writing and during discussions. At times, a discussion may veer into an area that’s too emotional, private, or sensitive for your group to handle. Don’t hesitate to stop such a discussion and return to the topic another day, or to talk in private with the teen or teens involved.

You’ll need to decide the degree to which you want to encourage teens to talk or write about sensitive subjects, such as sexuality or drug use. You can then tailor discussion questions and writing activities accordingly. Whatever approach you take, consider asking group members if they have any questions or concerns about confidentiality or privacy (for example, there may be information they’re comfortable sharing with you but wouldn’t want their families or classmates to know about). Also, tell them any concerns you have about information you wouldn’t feel comfortable keeping to yourself or that you’re legally obligated to report. If there are any subjects you feel are inappropriate for an assignment, you should make that clear. Finally, assure students that sharing their writing with classmates is entirely voluntary.

Keep in mind that the purpose of these group sessions is not to force members to reveal private thoughts and experiences, but to reflect on the meaning and personal relevance of stories by teens who've overcome tough times. As mentioned, the stories provide a safe arena for teens to engage important issues without revealing specifics of their own lives. When students do choose to be personally revealing, the benefits of such candor usually far outweigh any negative consequences. While you need to be aware of problematic situations that may develop, be aware also of the many positive interactions that can evolve from frank, open engagement of issues central to the lives of teens today.

### Know When to Seek Outside Help

From time to time, reading and discussing personal stories about sensitive issues may prompt teens in your group to reveal private information about their lives. If a teen's disclosure troubles you, tell your principal or supervisor. You may also need to seek help from a counselor, social worker, or therapist.

If a teen reveals that he or she is living in an abusive situation, you have an obligation to report what you've heard. Regulations governing the reporting of child abuse differ from state to state. Many states have specific guidelines identifying certain professionals as mandatory reporters. Check with your principal or the head of your agency to determine the proper course of action and your responsibilities if such a situation should arise.

### DO

- use the stories to connect with teens
- establish group guidelines
- know where you stand on confidentiality
- decide how you'll handle sensitive issues
- know when to ask for help

### DON'T

- pressure teens to talk about their lives
- pursue a discussion if it goes into overly sensitive areas

## Offer Respect

Being respected makes teens feel safe. Your respect lets them know that you see them as important and valuable. According to Bonnie Benard, who writes widely on the topic of resilience, respect figures heavily in "turnaround relationships" that help teens change course and improve their lives.<sup>2</sup> There are specific ways of talking to and acting toward teens that leaders can use to convey respect.

**Show interest in what teens think.** One of your major roles is to be a sounding board for the range of views these stories will raise. You don't need to have all the answers. Listening and responding respectfully assures teens of your interest and concern.

Some teens may be eager contributors to discussion. Others won't respond at first—they're waiting to see if you're serious, if you can be trusted. They'll watch you, and they'll watch each other. By listening to what they say, not getting sidetracked by what you want them to say, and watching their body language and facial expressions, you'll get a sense of how to encourage participation.

After they've looked you over and sized you up, a few brave souls will begin to show interest. They'll engage tentatively in discussion, volunteering more about themselves. They'll talk to you alone when the group session or class is over. They may take advantage of the privacy that writing offers to be more open about their lives and concerns.

**Wait for teens to talk.** As you lead your group through discussions and activities, be sure to listen to what members have to say. Don't rush to closure or be too hasty in moving along to another topic. Let teens react to the stories, or even tell

2. Bonnie Benard, "How to Be a Turnaround Teacher," in *Reaching Today's Youth, The Community Circle of Caring Journal* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1998), 31–35.

their own stories. Ask questions to clarify what you don't understand. When group members see that you're interested in them and respect their reactions to what they've read—and that your goal is to understand them and help them develop their own personal strengths—they'll keep talking.

**Emphasize choice, freedom, and personal responsibility.** It can be difficult at times to withhold judgment about what you hear. You may worry that refraining from criticizing behavior or telling teens what they should be doing is condoning what shouldn't be condoned, such as smoking marijuana or misusing alcohol.

However, being critical, passing judgment, and resorting to your adult authority can destroy the feeling of respect that teens need to participate and benefit fully from group meetings. When you work with the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong*, you're not being irresponsible when you refrain from judging. (This isn't the same as staying uninvolved if you suspect something is happening to a student that you must report to a colleague or outside professional. See "Handling Sensitive Issues" and "Know When to Seek Outside Help," pages 7–8.) While the stories show how difficult being a teen can be, each one is infused with positive values—forgiveness, devotion, self-control, responsibility, the importance of education, and much more. Each young writer has clear strengths and the determination to work through problems. Without sacrificing your role as leader, you can safely let these stories speak for themselves. Each conveys positive values that young people need to hear about—in a language they'll understand and accept.

### DO

- show interest in what teens think
- wait for teens to talk
- emphasize choice, freedom, and personal responsibility

### DON'T

- fish for answers you want to hear
- take sides
- rush to closure
- judge or criticize

## Acknowledge Pain, but Talk About Strengths

Teens who have faced even minor adversity often want you to know how bad they feel. Sometimes they reveal their hurt by treating others as unjustly as they've been treated. Sometimes it just shows on their faces or in symptoms like depression, an inability to concentrate and learn, or anxiety. Sometimes, if you have a trusting relationship with them, teens will tell you about their hurts directly.

No matter how group members let you know they're feeling bad, you'll help them most by fostering their resilience through acknowledging their pain, crediting the efforts they're making to prevail, and conveying your expectation that they can make it despite the obstacles in their path. Teens don't want our pity, our diagnostic label, or our analysis of how they've gone wrong. More often than not, they don't even want our advice.

As you work with *The Struggle to Be Strong*, you'll see the need, sometimes, to walk a fine line—to acknowledge the hard times and painful feelings experienced by group members while focusing equally on their strengths and their accomplishments. The suggestions in this guide will help you find the right balance.

**Focus on each story's underlying theme of resilience.** The stories present enough variations on the themes of personal challenges and adversity to touch everyone in your group. However, one of your main jobs as group leader is to remind teens that pain and setbacks are only part of each story. The other part, the underlying theme, is about strength and perseverance. When you point out the strengths of the teen writers, you help group members recognize their own strengths and see ways to act on them.

**Use the names of the resiliencies.** If you ask teens what their strengths are, they're likely to respond as many adults would, with a blank look or an embarrassed shrug of the shoulders. Some may even suspect that your question is a prelude to a speech about what they should be doing.

The resiliencies provide a framework for you to show group members what they, and other teens like them, are doing. The names of the seven resiliencies are common everyday words. The

definitions are written in a language that is natural and meaningful for teens. Use the names and definitions as you work with the stories. They'll give you the vocabulary you need to point out the strengths of the teen writers and to help your group members see and talk about their own strengths.

For example, when they read Chris Kanarick's story, "How to Survive Shopping with Mom," they'll see how humor can get people through embarrassing situations. When they read "Color Me Different," they'll see how insight, or asking tough questions, helps Jamal K. Greene deal with being unfairly stereotyped; they may even work up the courage to ask some tough questions of their own. When they read "How Writing Helps Me," they'll see how Terry-Ann Da Costa's sense of loss diminishes as she uses her creativity to express herself and help others. They may be encouraged to think of times when creativity helped them.

**Emphasize possibilities and opportunities for personal growth.** The stories are paradoxical, mingling strengths with vulnerabilities, victories with setbacks. Resist getting sidetracked by the problems described; instead, encourage students to see how the authors find the possibility and opportunity for growth in their situations. When you do, group members may begin to connect the strengths they see in the stories with their own lives. They may even be pleasantly surprised or relieved to see that you're more interested in talking about what teens do right than in what's wrong with them.

**Note each author's capacity to grow and learn from experience.** Many of the teen writers describe the obstacles they've faced in their lives—and for some, those obstacles were considerable: living on the streets, living in foster care, facing peer pressure to abuse alcohol or drugs, having a sick or addicted parent. Each writer, however, shows the capacity to grow and learn from experiences, even bad or painful ones. Many advise their readers to look at their own problems as learning experiences that can make them stronger. Encourage group members not to dwell on the obstacles described but to focus on ways the writers gain strength and maturity from their experiences.

### DO

- focus on each story's underlying theme of resilience
- name the resiliencies
- emphasize possibilities and opportunities
- note each author's capacity to grow and learn from experience

### DON'T

- lament the pain of the authors or group members
- get sidetracked by problems
- dwell on obstacles

# HOW THE SESSION PLANS WORK

This guide presents activities for each of the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* in sequential order. However, the success of your sessions doesn't depend on starting with the first story and going sequentially through the thirtieth story. As mentioned earlier, the stories are grouped in sections, with each section highlighting one of the seven resiliencies. After previewing the stories, you may decide that some are more relevant or appropriate for your particular group than others are. You may also find that certain activities work better with your group. The anthology is flexible enough to accommodate your needs. (For stories on specific topics, see "Guide to Topics" on pages 172–174 of the anthology.)

Similarly, there are probably as many ways to use the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* as there are leaders. You have your own teaching style and strengths and should feel free to lead group sessions in ways that suit you and meet the needs of the teens you're working with. Since many leaders appreciate ideas and approaches they can use immediately, without burdensome preparation, the sections that follow offer specific suggestions for working with the stories.

It's important that you have several copies of the anthology on hand for teens to use. Ideally, all group members will have their own copy and will bring it to each session. Teens should come to each session with writing materials. You may want them to bring notebooks they can use as journals. If you'll be writing along with your group during the freewriting activities (see pages 14–15), you'll want to bring your own notebook or journal. You'll also find it useful to have a whiteboard or an easel. A few group activities include materials lists.

If, after your program is finished, you'd like group members to give you feedback about the group, use the "Discussion Group Evaluation" on page 149.

The chart on this page presents a typical sequence of preparation and group activities. Suggested activity times are based on a one-hour session; you'll need to adapt these to your specific circumstances. Times can be adjusted if, for example, journal writing or other writing activities are done at home. Another option is to take two sessions

to cover a story, leaving more time for discussion, writing, and an additional role play.

You might want to refer to the chart as you read the descriptions of the activities in the following pages. Please note:

- Each set of story sessions begins with guidelines for a discussion of the particular resilience that the stories illustrate.
- Each story session begins with a section of information and suggestions for leaders called "Preparing to Lead the Activities." These are followed by the various group activities.
- Each set of story sessions ends with a summary activity asking teens to reflect on and compare the stories in the section.

## A Typical Session

This plan for leading the session on the first story in the Insight section, "I Don't Know What the Word *Mommy Means*" by Younique Symone, shows a typical sequence of activities.<sup>3</sup>

### PREPARING TO LEAD THE ACTIVITIES

#### Story Summary

#### A Moment of Reflection

#### How Insight Works in the Story

Seeing Younique's Insight

Why Insight Is a Struggle for Younique

#### Useful Concept Words

### ACTIVITIES

1. **Freewriting: Finding Yourself in the Story** (10 minutes)

2. **Discussion: Understanding Events** (5 minutes)

3. **Discussion: Understanding Issues** (10 minutes)

Younique's Insight

Connecting with the Issues

4. **Role Plays** (15 minutes)

5. **Writing Activities: Taking It Further** (10 minutes)

6. **In Your Journal: Making It Personal** (10 minutes)

3. Please note that the number and type of group activities vary from story to story.

## The Value of Writing

Reading and discussion may seem like natural choices to use with your group. However, writing may seem a less obvious or practical choice—even somewhat intimidating—if you don't customarily use it in your work with teens. When group members are reluctant writers or have limited skills, you may choose to focus most of your group time on discussion, role play, and other group activities. However, writing, even in modest amounts, can be an extremely effective tool for encouraging reflection in all teens, including those with limited writing ability or experience.

Research has shown that writing about important personal experiences and complex feelings is difficult, but ultimately very helpful when the writer links events and emotions.<sup>4</sup> During discussions, teens may simply vent their emotions or describe what happened to them. Writing allows them to reflect privately and helps them make deeper connections between their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Louise DeSalvo makes this point in her excellent analysis of the writing process, *Writing as a Way of Healing*: “Writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail *and* how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health. . . . [S]imply writing about traumatic events or venting our feelings about trauma without *linking* the two does not result in significant health or emotional benefits. . . . *We must write in a way that links detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings—then and now—about what happened.*” [Emphasis in original.] In support of her point, DeSalvo cites research showing that “the more days people wrote, the more beneficial were the effects from writing. And these benefits occurred despite educational level: People with sixth-grade educations benefited as much as those with advanced degrees.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps you've had the personal experience of keeping a diary or journal or of writing letters. If so, you know that writing can reveal things about yourself that weren't obvious before. Using writing to make sense of chaotic feelings can give them a form and order that allow you to have distance from them, and thus more control over them.

Writing can serve this function for the teens in your group. Activities are designed for students with a wide range of abilities and interests. Responses need not be lengthy (or have perfect spelling or grammar); a few sentences can prompt valuable reflection. As necessary, assure teens that you're looking not for length but for their thoughtful engagement with the material.

For further suggestions on using writing, see “Freewriting: Finding Yourself in the Story,” pages 14–15, “Writing Activities: Taking It Further,” page 17, and “In Your Journal: Making It Personal,” page 17.

4. See, for example, the following work by James W. Pennebaker: “Confession, Inhibition, and Disease,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 22, edited by Leonard Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1989); *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain*, with Joshua M. Smyth (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016); “Writing Your Wrongs,” *American Health* 10, no. 1 (1991), 64–67; “Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process,” *Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (1997), 162–66.

5. Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 25–26. DeSalvo cites the work of Pennebaker. See the preceding note.



## Leading Your Group

Following are descriptions of each preparation and activity section.

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### Preparing to Lead the Activities

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#### Story Summary

Here you'll find the gist of the story so you can review the main points right before you discuss it with your group.

#### A Moment of Reflection

This section asks you to consider from your own perspective the questions group members will address during freewriting (see "Freewriting: Finding Yourself in the Story," pages 14–15). "A Moment of Reflection" helps you bridge the gap between you and your group, inviting you to remember your own challenges as a teen or to focus on a current dilemma or set of circumstances. The goal is to put you in a frame of mind that will make working with the stories a more satisfying experience. For example, when you reflect in advance on your own experiences with seeking independence, you're in a better position to explore that theme as it comes up in your group.

#### How the Resilience Works in the Story Seeing the Writer's Resilience

This section provides a clear, concise description of how a particular resilience works for the writer of each story. As mentioned, many of the teen writers demonstrate more than one resilience, but each story highlights or features a particular resilience. For example, in "I Don't Know What the Word *Mommy* Means," as Younique Symone strives to forge her own future, insight is her most crucial resilience, although independence and initiative also play roles. "Seeing Younique's Insight" focuses on those parts of Younique's story that emphasize insight.

#### Why the Resilience Is a Struggle for the Writer

This section goes to the heart of the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong*, showing the obstacles that get in the way of each writer's resilience. The commentary emphasizes that resilience is not about overcoming problems once and for all,

but about learning to deal with them day by day. For the teens you work with, resilience is often a matter of winning small victories rather than having a single dramatic success. This section highlights the writer's struggle so you can help group members identify with the person rather than feel intimidated by a success that, at first glance, might seem beyond reach.

#### Useful Concept Words

Building a vocabulary of resilience is an essential part of *The Struggle to Be Strong*. In this section, you'll find a list of several "concept words" that are central to a story's themes, along with definitions for each word and sentences relating the words to the story. To assist students in understanding and discussing the story, you may want to write these words on the board and explain them when they're used in a discussion question or activity (where the words are shown in italics).

The seven resiliencies provide a vocabulary of strengths that teens can use to help understand how they themselves meet challenges. By devoting time to the concept words specific to each story, you offer group members an additional tool for describing thoughts, feelings, and situations. You also support their academic success. Since the words are presented in the context of a story teens can relate to, they're more likely to be retained than are words from a conventional vocabulary list.

(If teens are unfamiliar with any of the slang terms or other special language in the stories, direct them to the glossary on page 171 of the anthology.)

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### Activities

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Discussion, writing exercises, and group activities are all intended to help teens develop a deeper understanding of each story. Most important, they're designed to help group members see the relevance of the resiliencies to their own lives. Feel free to pick and choose among these activities, adapting them to your own style and objectives. For example, many of the discussion questions can be used as writing assignments, and vice versa.

If, as suggested in this guide, you choose to discuss the stories before moving on to the other

exercises, you'll find that the discussion will help teens participate fully in the writing, role play, and other group activities that follow. Group and writing activities, in turn, build on the discussion that precedes them. Similarly, freewriting (discussed next), when used as your first session activity, can enrich the discussions and activities that follow.

### Freewriting: Finding Yourself in the Story

After teens have read the story, a few minutes of freewriting about their personal connection to the story's main theme can enrich the activities that follow. Freewriting tends to deepen reflection and stimulate discussion. It can make the difference between an aimless discussion and one in which teens are really engaged. Think of freewriting as a warm-up not only for discussion, but also for the various activities that follow.

In freewriting, teens are freed from customary rules in the interest of getting their thoughts and feelings down on paper. Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation don't matter in freewriting. The only rule is to write without stopping. Writing nonstop frees up emotions and ideas. When teens are stuck, tell them to write, "I don't know what to say" over and over, until something occurs to them. Limit writing to a brief amount of time (usually 90 seconds per question, two minutes maximum), so there's no pressure to write at length. These techniques—deemphasizing correctness, writing without stopping, and writing for only a brief time—free teens to go straight to the heart of an issue and to tap directly into what they feel and think.

Expect all group members to participate in freewriting, but emphasize that doing so won't be hard and that they don't have to share what they write. Since the only requirement is for teens to keep their pens moving, freewriting is easy for all teens, including unskilled or reluctant writers.

The format of each freewriting exercise is a statement beginning with "Think of a time when . . ." This statement anchors the group in the freewriting theme by asking them to think about a particular incident or circumstance in their lives—one that is linked to a major theme of the story.

Questions about the incident or circumstance follow. Pause after each question, allowing 90 seconds for writing (two minutes maximum).

Freewriting requires only writing materials, a watch or clock, and clear instructions. It's best if everyone has read the story first, because the purpose of freewriting is to encourage a personal connection with the story's themes. It's suggested that you write along with your group, perhaps in a journal you keep for these sessions. (The statement and questions are similar to those you considered in "A Moment of Reflection," described on page 13.) Whatever you jot down, even a few short sentences, can help highlight the emotional common ground between you and your group. If you'll be writing, have handy your own journal and tell students you'll be participating.

The first time you present this activity, explain the procedure. Say:

**To connect with the themes of this story, we're going to do something called freewriting. Freewriting is just that: writing that lets us feel free to write whatever comes to mind. Here's how it works. First I'll read a statement for you to think about. Then I'll read several questions. These all have to do with the basic ideas of the story we're going to discuss—but from your own point of view. After each question, I'll pause to give you time to write your answers. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. Just write freely for 90 seconds without stopping. Let your ideas flow. If nothing at all comes to mind, write "I have nothing to say" until something occurs to you. Remember that this writing is private. It's up to you whether you choose to share it with the group.**

After teens are done writing, allow time for volunteers to either read what they've written or to discuss their feelings about freewriting if they prefer not to reveal specifics. (Occasionally, you may want to read some of what you write to help build trust and encourage discussion.) If no one volunteers, ask the group to think about what they've written as they begin discussing the story. Teens are specifically asked to read over their freewriting silently before you ask certain questions from the "Understanding Issues" section (see page 15).

Even if you've never used writing in your work with teens, try freewriting. You may be pleasantly surprised by the results. Feel free to substitute your own topics as you become more comfortable with this technique.

### Avoiding Roadblocks

While many of the stories in *The Struggle to Be Strong* present typical coming-of-age issues, others deal with more emotional and potentially controversial subjects: drug abuse, eating disorders, sexual identity. For those stories (and for stories in which the writer's behavior or actions could be misconstrued), you'll find a boxed note with guidelines on possible reactions from teens that could derail discussion. Suggestions are offered on ways to work around such "roadblocks"; for example, by focusing discussion on how the writer demonstrates a particular resilience or on other important themes in the story.

### Discussion: Understanding Events

Basic comprehension of the story is essential before teens can reflect on themes and issues. The first set of suggested discussion questions focuses on concrete details of plot. (Reviewing these questions will also help teens who haven't read the story get an idea of what you're talking about.) Depending on your objectives, you can use these questions to help teens develop their reading comprehension.

### Discussion: Understanding Issues

Questions here move group members to the underlying themes of the story and then to the relevance of those themes to their own lives. The first set engages teens in reflection on the writer's resilience, the behavior that allows him or her to overcome obstacles and make changes. The second set encourages teens to make connections between their own experiences, conflicts, and strengths and those of the writer. By helping them make these connections, you increase their capacity to recognize and build on their resilience.

You can adjust the emotional temperature of the discussion, depending on your own comfort level

and situation and how the group is responding. Teens should not be expected to confide intimate experiences or private feelings during a group discussion. Questions are organized to allow a range of responses. (See "Handling Sensitive Issues," pages 7–8.)

### Role Plays

Most stories include one or two suggested role plays that can help teens more directly explore and experience the ideas in the stories. Role play helps them connect with the stories in ways that go beyond reading, discussion, and writing. Not every teen in your group will want to participate in the role plays, nor do they need to (unless participation is a requirement in your group). But in every group there will be teens who want to participate—who, in fact, especially enjoy this kind of activity. Observers contribute by participating in the suggested discussion following each role play. Notice that each role play section begins with an objective connecting the scenarios with the main ideas of the story.

### Guidelines for Role Plays<sup>6</sup>

#### Objectives

"Doing" is a powerful learning tool. Role playing can make the stories and resiliencies come alive for teens. By introducing the ideas of dramatic conflict and dramatic need, role plays enable teens to connect emotionally with the conflicts and challenges faced by the writers. Participating in role plays encourages teens to think and act on their feet, loosen up creatively, and become comfortable with each other. Role plays also give them practice in listening carefully and working cooperatively.

#### Procedure

The first time your group tries a role play, explain the purpose of the activity: to help them better understand the story. Point out that you're not looking for great performers—merely for two and sometimes three volunteers to show what characters from the story would do and say in a certain

6. These guidelines are adapted from a drama curriculum used with teens at the DreamYard Project in Los Angeles and are used with permission. Thanks to Chris Henrikson of DreamYard for sharing the curriculum and for his assistance in developing the role plays in this book. For more information on role plays or on using a drama curriculum with teens, contact DreamYard Project, Inc., at dreamyard.com.

situation. Tell them that each role play will last no more than five to ten minutes.

Also discuss the role of observers. Tell group members that they are to listen closely, refrain from talking, think about what they would say or do in the same situation, and be ready to discuss the role play when it's over.

Establish guidelines for role plays. For example:

- No physical contact between role players.
- Players should follow the role play description, but they're also free to introduce information that seems appropriate to the character and the scene.

For each role play:

1. Before beginning, review the basics of the story.
2. Read the scenario aloud. Allow time for questions or comments.
3. Ask for volunteers. If no one volunteers, you might offer to play one part yourself; this will usually induce someone to join you. In most groups, however, there are likely to be at least two people so drawn into the story's themes that they're eager to do the role play.
4. Once you have volunteers, quickly review with each person what his or her *dramatic need* is in the scene. The characters' needs (what they want, as most scenarios phrase it) establish a clear conflict that should drive the action of the role play. Players are to keep their character's need or want in mind as they act out the scene. What they say should be related to getting the need or want satisfied. For example:
  - » Younique wants her mother to know how angry she is. Younique's mother wants to avoid the confrontation.
  - » Elliott's friend drinks a lot but wants to convince Elliott that he or she doesn't have a problem with alcohol. Elliott wants to convince his friend that the drinking is out of control and that the friend should give it up.

Before a role play, you might list each character's dramatic need on the board. Be sure players and observers are clear about the scene. Suggest that

players refer to the board if they get stuck during the role play and don't know what to say.

Be prepared to stand back and let teens act out their roles and gain momentum. Provide prompts and guidance as necessary. If a role play seems stalled, you may want to intervene. Try these strategies:

- Ask the players to check the board and review their dramatic needs in the scene.
- Ask observers for suggestions.
- If a player seems out of ideas, ask an observer to take the player's place in the scene.
- If a role play gets out of hand because of silly or inappropriate remarks, note that such remarks are not in character.

Some scenarios concern sensitive situations. Remind group members that they're not playing themselves—they're playing and interpreting characters. No one should be made uncomfortable during a role play, so if you see that happening, end the activity.

### Discussion

When the scene has played itself out, encourage teens to reflect on what they saw and how they interpreted it. Use the suggested questions that follow each role play, or substitute your own. You might also ask the players how they felt while playing their respective characters.

### Follow-Up

It's sometimes useful to ask for new volunteers to play the same scene again. This allows teens to compare the impact and meaning of the scene when it's played by different actors. You might also ask group members to describe in writing their reactions to the role plays or to compose new scenarios.

As time permits, encourage your group to create and perform new role plays on the resilience themes in the stories. These scenarios can be variations on the stories or come from teens' own experiences.

### Group Activity

Some stories include a group activity in addition to role plays. Like role plays, these activities

encourage teens to more directly explore and experience the ideas in the stories. Each group activity includes a specific objective and a step-by-step procedure. Each is followed by suggested discussion questions asking teens to consider what they learned from the activity and to explore the connection between the activity and the story.

### Writing Activities: Taking It Further

All writing activities can be geared to the needs and level of your group. To encourage students to write, downplay grammar and spelling errors. Instead, look hard at the content of what they write, and don't be shy about asking them to strive to express their ideas as clearly as they possibly can. Once students believe that you care about their ideas, they'll probably be willing to listen to your suggestions about other aspects of their writing, if making such suggestions is part of your role.

Writing activities can be done individually, in small groups, or at home. The objective for each activity links the writing topic to themes and ideas from the story. The first activity for every story asks teens to describe the writer's resilience in their own words. They do this in the form of a letter written as though they were the story writer. Other writing activities challenge teens to explore the story's themes from a variety of perspectives and to make a personal connection to them.

Keep in mind that one paragraph is sufficient for most of the activities, making them appropriate for teens with limited writing ability. However, depending on your group and your objectives as a leader, topics can also be used for advanced writing assignments, such as essays, formal letters, opinion pieces, or reports. If you choose to evaluate writing activities, don't hesitate to hold group members to high standards of expression and thinking. Teens are usually grateful for that kind of attention and direction.

When activities are completed, you can invite volunteers to read their work to the group. You might also discuss how teens felt about the purpose and value of the writing.

See "The Value of Writing," page 12, for more information.

### In Your Journal: Making It Personal

Writing in a journal provides teens the opportunity to reflect on their personal connection with the stories. Journals are a means of private enrichment—not essential, but valuable to teens' understanding. As always, you can adapt journal writing to fit the goals and needs of your group. You may want members to write in their journals after every story, only after particular stories, or whenever they choose to.

As with freewriting, you'll want to assure group members that their privacy will be respected. If your program or objectives require you to collect and evaluate journals, be sure teens understand this so they can decide how revealing to be in entries. Emphasize that you will be the only person reading the journals and tell students what you'll be looking for. Some leaders make journals optional and prefer that teens keep them private.

However you use journal writing, remember that it's not the length of the entries that makes them effective, but the degree to which teens become emotionally connected with the writing. One way of fostering that connection is to encourage teens to move beyond merely describing events or people in their lives; instead, challenge them to remember what they were *feeling* in reaction to those people and events.

### Directing a Typical Group Session

Most group sessions, no matter how well-planned, take on a life of their own. As a leader you will often have to go with the flow, while also trying to guide and direct activities as best you can. Here are a few suggestions for how to give general direction.

First, before you start a session, read the story, take time for "A Moment of Reflection," and familiarize yourself with all the preliminary information, discussion questions, and activities. Plan to follow the suggested sequence, but be prepared to ask questions and assign activities at whatever point they seem appropriate.

Second, have your group read the story, either in class or at home, before the session. Third, use

the freewriting exercise to help teens focus before you begin the discussion. Fourth, begin discussion with the questions under the heading “Discussion: Understanding Events” to make sure teens have understood what happened in the story. However, expect that group members will go off on tangents, bringing in their own related experiences. That’s fine—getting teens to talk about their experiences is one of the main objectives of reading the story. However (and here’s the tricky part), you don’t want them to stray *too far* from the story and just start venting about their own issues.

Challenge teens to relate their own experiences and feelings to those of the writer. For example, Christopher A. Bogle’s story, “Controlling My Temper,” may spark many accounts of situations in which group members lost their temper, thought they were treated unfairly by adults, and so forth. That’s the first step. The next step is to move the discussion to the point where teens are comparing themselves with Christopher. Identifying situations where they, like Christopher, worked on controlling their tempers will help them see their own resilience. If they haven’t been able to control their tempers as Christopher did, or if they’re silent on the subject, you can mention

that seeing the benefits of what Christopher did is a way for them to develop their own resilience. Remind them that Christopher’s achievement wasn’t easy; point out what he did to help himself. To encourage group members’ identification with the writer, move from “Discussion: Understanding Events” to “Discussion: Understanding Issues.” Questions here focus on the writer’s resilience and on teens’ personal connections with the issues in the story.

You may at times want to stop the discussion and either move to role plays or assign one of the writing activities. This may be advisable when you feel a shift in the group’s attention, when you want to change the pace of the session, or when time is limited.

You may find that the entire session unfolds from the group’s reactions to the plot questions suggested in “Discussion: Understanding Events.” If you expect members to go beyond literal answers to those questions and if you’ve previewed the questions under “Discussion: Understanding Issues” and the role plays and writing activities, you’ll be prepared both to go with the flow and also to channel it in a constructive direction.

# GETTING STARTED

Once you know who will be in your group, schedule an introductory meeting. Following is a suggested agenda for such a meeting.

## Introductory Meeting

Welcome group members and introduce yourself, if necessary. If teens don't know each other, allow time for introductions. Suggest that members briefly tell something about themselves they'd like the group to know.

Then say:

**This group will be discussing and working with stories from an anthology called *The Struggle to Be Strong*. These are true stories written by teens who've found the strength to get through tough times. We'll talk about the stories, do some group activities that will help us understand them better, and write about ways the stories connect with our own lives, feelings, and experiences.**

You might also explain your role as leader, perhaps saying that you won't be a "teacher" in the usual sense of the word. Instead, the focus will be on teens themselves. You'll be their guide, listening carefully and contributing your own ideas when appropriate, but mostly helping them connect with the themes of the stories. Emphasize that you will all learn from each other.

Talk with your group about logistics:

- meeting place and time
- materials they should bring—pen, paper, perhaps a journal
- any advance preparation—decide if you'll expect them to read the story before each session or whether you'll allow group time for reading
- procedure to follow if they must miss a session

At some point during this meeting, discuss group guidelines. As appropriate, distribute copies of your own guidelines. Go over what you expect from group members and ask if anyone has

questions or needs clarification. You might post a copy of the guidelines in your meeting room.

Distribute copies of the anthology and ask teens to read the first story before the first session. (If you'll be allowing group time for reading, tell students.) Direct the group's attention to the "Think About It" questions following the story; suggest that teens reflect on—and possibly jot down ideas about—these questions before the session.

Next, if time permits, introduce the concept of resilience by conducting the following activity. (As necessary, review the explanation of freewriting on pages 14–15.)

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## Procedure

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1. Ask everyone to take out writing materials. Explain that you'd like them to write freely for a short time in response to some questions you'll read. Assure them that spelling and grammar aren't important and that they won't be asked to turn in their papers or read them aloud. What they write will be kept private if they choose, but those who want to share will get time to read some of what they've written or talk about it.

**Note:** Consider writing along with your group. It can be valuable for teens to see you participating and to know that the questions about going through tough times apply to you as well as to them—to adults as well as to teens.

2. Read the following, pausing for 60–90 seconds after each question to allow time for writing and thinking:

**Think of a hard time you've gone through. What was the situation? Did your friends or family understand what you were going through? If not, what might have helped them understand? Did you get over those hard times? If so, what helped you? If not, what do you think would help you?**

Tell group members when time is almost up. When time is up, let people finish their sentences.

3. Ask for volunteers willing to read what they wrote or to talk in more general terms about their responses to the topic. (For example, they might say they wrote about “a family problem.”) You might also consider sharing what you wrote, particularly if no one volunteers to talk. Your openness can build trust and spur participation.
4. Explain that the writers in *The Struggle to Be Strong* have felt some of these same emotions and have gone through similar experiences. They write about issues like controlling a bad temper, being overweight, being shy, being abandoned, going against the crowd. But besides describing tough times, these writers also describe their *resilience*.
5. Write *resilience* on the board or on a flip chart. Next to the word, write this definition: *helping yourself through tough times*. Note again that besides describing their troubles, the writers in *The Struggle to Be Strong* also describe their resilience—their persistence; what they do to keep going, learning, and changing. Mention that by reading and discussing these stories, you hope group members will recognize their own strengths and see ways they can use their own resilience.

**Optional:** Read aloud or have volunteers read “A Message to You” and Veronica Chambers’s introduction, “A Way Out of ‘No Way Out,’” pages 1–6 in the anthology. Lenny Jones and Veronica Chambers discuss resilience in personal terms that teens will appreciate. (If you’ve run out of time, ask teens to do this reading at home.)

## We'd Like to Hear from You

Let us know how these stories and activities work for you. Write to us, send us an email, or contact us online:

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We hope you’ll find that reading and reflecting on true stories by resilient teens helps you recognize and build strengths in the young people you work with.

**Sybil Wolin, Al Desetta, and Keith Hefner**



humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY  
INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
humor INDEPENDENCE  
RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY

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**SESSIONS**

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INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
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INSIGHT INITIATIVE *creativity*  
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RELATIONSHIPS MORALITY

# INSIGHT

## ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS

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Before discussing the stories in this section, ask the group to read the introductory material about insight in their anthology, pages 10 and 11. Allow time for questions and brief discussion. Be sure teens understand the following:

- **INSIGHT** is asking tough questions and giving honest answers about yourself and the difficult situations you find yourself in.
- The opposite of **INSIGHT** is avoiding a painful truth.
- **INSIGHT** is hard because the urge to blame others for your troubles, instead of looking honestly at your own role, is powerful.
- **INSIGHT** helps you see things as they really are, not as you wish they would be.

As teens read each story, encourage them to look for ways the writer demonstrates insight. Also suggest that they reflect on—and possibly jot down ideas about—the questions that follow each story (“Think About It”). Refer them to the introductory section “Think About It—and Maybe Write About It,” pages 7–8 in the anthology.

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# I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE WORD *MOMMY* MEANS

by Younique Symone

Pages 12–15 in *The Struggle to Be Strong*

## Preparing to Lead the Activities

### Story Summary

Younique and her two sisters have been abandoned by their mother, who is a drug addict. They are raised by an unloving aunt and uncle. Each time their mother visits, Younique's sisters pretend everything is okay. Younique is the only member of her family who speaks honestly about her mother's neglect and abandonment. She sees that her mother is repeating a long family history of poor parenting and is unlikely to stop. So Younique gives up trying to change her mother and instead takes action to change herself. She vows to break her family's destructive cycle and to put her children first when she becomes a mother.

### A Moment of Reflection

To connect with the story's themes, consider from your own perspective the questions group members will address during freewriting: Think of a time when a problem was staring you in the face, but everyone around you was ignoring it or making excuses. What were you seeing that others were trying not to see? Did you speak up about the problem? If you did, how were you treated? If you didn't, how did it feel to keep silent?

### How Insight Works in the Story

#### Seeing Younique's Insight

We see Younique's insight in the beginning of the story. She describes how easy it is to create

an illusion: "If you looked at any of my baby pictures, you would see a little girl who seemed happy, loved, and cared for." Then she dispels the illusion that she had a happy childhood: "But the hardcore truth is, my mother didn't take care of us." Once Younique drops the illusion that hers is a perfect family, she asks questions no one else in her family asks. She demands to know why her mother isn't part of her children's lives. Unlike her sisters, she acknowledges her bitter feelings: "I hated when my mother came around, period." However, Younique also realizes that her mother is repeating a family history of irresponsible parenting. This insight helps her in two ways. It leads her to see an important truth: "My mother is not going to change because I want her to." It is also the foundation of an identity that's different from her family's. She will have children when she's ready to be a good parent. She wants to "break the cycle."

### Why Insight Is a Struggle for Younique

Children—even those who have been abused—want to believe their parents are good, competent, and caring. The alternative is almost unthinkable, since children rely on their parents for survival. Because of this natural inclination, Younique at first wants to deny that her mother abandoned her: "For a while, when people asked me why I lived with my aunt, I would say my mother died when I was three." Eventually, however, she asks herself what's wrong with her mother and faces the truth. She "grows up," realizing that her mother isn't going to change. This insight is hard for Younique, particularly because her family hates her outspokenness. But she is able to see beyond her anger at them. Against the odds, she is determined to break the family cycle.

## Useful Concept Words

To assist teens in understanding and discussing this story, you may want to introduce some or all of the following concept words by making them part of discussions and activities. Write them on the board in advance and plan to explain each word when it appears in a suggested discussion question or activity (where the words are shown in italics). Here are the concept words, with definitions and sentences relating them to the story.

***confront***: to come face-to-face with something or someone

Unlike her sisters, Younique ***confronts*** her mother about her drug abuse.

***cycle***: something that happens again and again  
Younique wants to break her family's destructive ***cycle*** of bad parenting.

***deny***: to refuse to accept or acknowledge something  
Younique's family ***denies*** the truth about her mother's neglectful behavior.

## Activities

### 1. Freewriting: Finding Yourself in the Story

After group members have finished reading the story, ask them to take out writing materials. If you'll be writing also, have handy your own journal and tell students you'll be participating. For a description of freewriting, see pages 14–15.

The following statement and questions are similar to those you considered earlier in "A Moment of Reflection." This time, you may want to write along with your group.

**Think of a time when a problem was staring you in the face, but everyone around you was ignoring it or making excuses. What was the problem? Why didn't people want to face it? Did you speak up about the problem? If you did, how were you treated? If you didn't, how did it feel to keep silent?**

After the freewriting, invite volunteers to share what they wrote. Allow time for brief discussion.

### NOTE: Avoiding Roadblocks

Some group members may feel that Younique is being too hard on her mother. Some may say, "I'd never give up on my mom." Encourage teens to discuss whether it is better to remain loyal to a parent who is addicted and has abandoned you, or to break off from that parent and get on with your life. Encourage the group to decide the question. Discuss the difference between respect that's deserved and respect that's undeserved.

Ask the group:

**Would it have been better if Younique hadn't rebelled against her mother? How would she be a different person today if she hadn't?**

## 2. Discussion: Understanding Events

To be sure group members have understood the story, ask questions such as:

- **How do Younique's aunt and uncle treat her? Give examples.**
- **What are some ways Younique rebels against her mother? How is her behavior toward her mother different from her sisters' behavior?**
- **Why does Younique say that her mother "had a rough childhood"? Why does she think her mother had children at a young age?**
- **What is Younique's mother doing now? What is Younique herself doing?**
- **At the end of the story, what does Younique say about the children she will someday have?**

## 3. Discussion: Understanding Issues

### Younique's Insight

Review with the group what insight is, why it's sometimes hard to come by, and how it can be helpful. Then, referring as necessary to "How

Insight Works in the Story” (page 24), ask questions such as:

- **Youniquie says her aunt and uncle abuse her. Do you agree? Explain your answer.**
- **Why do you think Youniquie used to tell people that her mother had died? Why doesn't she tell people that now?**
- **What does Youniquie mean when she says, “I grew up when I realized this: My mother is not going to change because I want her to”? What is the painful truth she *confronts*? Do you believe she has grown up? Why or why not?**
- **What is the family *cycle* that Youniquie is determined to break? What actions does she take to help her succeed where others in her family have failed?**
- **Do you think it would have been better if Youniquie hadn't *confronted* her mother? Why or why not? How would she be a different person if she hadn't rebelled?**

### Connecting with the Issues

Suggest that group members silently review what they wrote during freewriting. Then ask questions such as:

- **Do you think growing up means letting go of dreams that won't come true, such as Youniquie's dream of “one big, happy family”? Explain your answer.**
- **Do you think there are times when it's better not to confront a problem? Explain your answer.**
- **Have you ever been the only one to speak up about a problem? If so, what happened when you did?**
- **If you were Youniquie, would you be able to forgive your mother? Why or why not?**

## 4. Role Plays

For guidelines on role playing, see pages 15–16.

**Objective:** Group members will realize how difficult it is to confront uncomfortable truths about a family member and will practice ways of communicating such truths effectively.

### Scenario A

**Characters:** Youniquie, her mother

**Procedure:** Ask for volunteers to enact this scene.

**Youniquie wants her mother to know why she's angry and disappointed. Youniquie's mother wants to avoid the confrontation.**

Allow five to ten minutes for the role play. Afterward, discuss questions such as:

- **What did you see happening in this scene?**
- **If you were Youniquie, how would you feel about your mother's reaction to your feelings? If you were Youniquie's mother, how would you feel about what your daughter said?**
- **How did this role play affect or change your understanding of Youniquie's story?**

### Scenario B

**Characters:** Youniquie, one of her sisters

**Procedure:** Ask for volunteers to enact this scene.

**Youniquie wants her sister to speak up about her true feelings when their mother visits. Youniquie's sister wants to remain silent.**

Allow five to ten minutes for the role play. Afterward, discuss questions such as:

- **What did you see happening in this scene?**
- **If you were Youniquie, how would you feel about what your sister said? If you were Youniquie's sister, how would you feel about what Youniquie said?**
- **How did this role play affect or change your understanding of Youniquie's story?**

## 5. Writing Activities: Taking It Further

Ask students to complete one or more of the following activities individually, in small groups, or at home. Modify the activities as needed to suit the writing ability of group members. When activities are completed, invite volunteers to read their work to the group. Discuss how teens felt about the purpose and value of the writing.

### Activity A

**Objective:** Group members will describe Younique's insight in their own words.

**Pretend you're Younique. Write a letter to your sister explaining what you have come to accept about your mother and your family.**

### Activity B

**Objective:** Group members will consider the story from Younique's mother's point of view.

**Pretend you're Younique's mother. Write a letter to Younique explaining how your past has influenced the mother you are (or aren't) today.**

### Activity C

**Objective:** Group members will describe how a friend or relative handled a difficult situation using insight.

**Write about someone you know—a friend or relative—who got through a difficult time by**

**facing, rather than avoiding, the situation. What tough questions did the person have to face? How did the person handle his or her troubles?**

## 6. In Your Journal: Making It Personal

Encourage group members to reflect on the following topic in their journals:

**Although the truth is very painful, Younique is able to face it. She has insight and sees things as they are, not as she wishes they were or as others say they are. Think of a time in your life when, unlike Younique, you were not completely honest with yourself about a situation in your family, at school, among friends, or at work. What was the situation, and why weren't you honest with yourself about it? What did you gain by *denying* the truth? Although the truth may have been painful, what could you have gained by being honest with yourself?**