

NEWS AND TOOLS FOR HAPPINESS, LOVE, AND WISDOM

Volume 17,3 • June 2023

THE FOUR PILLARS OF CLIMATE HEALING

EXCERPTS FROM THE CLIMATE OPTIMIST HANDBOOK

© 2023 ANNE THERESE GENNARI

When I first decided to become a climate optimist, I thought the answer to doing so was to seek the good news and ignore the bad. I thought if I could only filter out all the negative and painful information about climate change, I could continue wearing the smile I was given and start to believe in a better world. I wanted to be the sun in all the clouds, for myself and for others, and continue to show up with optimism, action, and faith. If I gave in to the doom and gloom of climate despair, I was afraid I would lose myself back into that world and not be able to continue on my mission.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

What I had to learn the hard way is that there's no such thing as not knowing. Because even if you're trying hard—really hard—to focus only on the positive, a part of you still pays attention to everything else, and your body will remember the pain. While you're out there spreading sunshine, your subconscious picks up all the other valuable information it thinks you ought to pay attention to and stores it for later. And if you never give it any attention, that information will add up and keep adding up.

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin.

Michelle Keane edits the Bulletin, and it's designed and laid out by the team at Content Strategy Online.

To subscribe, go to

http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin.

It took me some years to recognize this, but one day, the outbursts started to become more and more frequent—crying in the shower, tantrums at the salad bar, foul moods over nothing in the car. The "attacks" always came without warning, and I never quite understood what was going on. I seemed to be holding on to something, but I didn't know what it was. Arthur (my husband), even more clueless, always tried to help, but he soon learned it was better just to leave it alone. I would come out of it eventually.

That is what having climate anxiety has done to me. I've cried in the shower. I've thrown adult tantrums over plastic forks. I've started fights with my family about things I can't remember. I've been angry for no reason, sad for no reason, and for years, I was haunted by this deep and uncomfortable feeling that something wasn't quite right. I've felt alone in the world as if no one truly hears or understands me, which only strengthened my anger toward the world. I've hated society. I've hated people and their ignorance. I've even hated myself many times. How could we live like this? How could we be so ignorant and selfish when the natural world is desperately crying for our help?

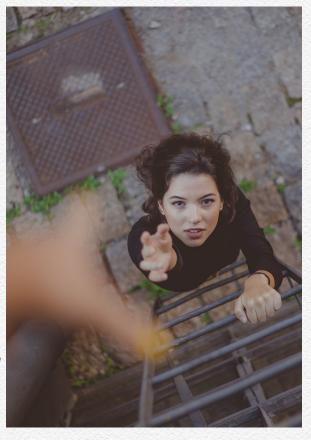


Climate anxiety is real, and it can show up in many ways. My low was probably when I was consciously starving myself because I wanted to feel the pain of the millions of suffering factory farm animals around the world. I thought if I could feel pain, I could somehow connect my pain with theirs, and we would be in it together. This might be the stupidest thing you've heard, but when you're upset, you often act in ways that don't make sense.

My climate optimist awakening (a moment of pure surrender when I cried on my parent's floor and landed in the message: "You're here to be a climate optimist") saved me in many ways. It was when I recognized I had to start taking serious care of myself or none of my work would matter. If I'm not strong, how can I help the world? If I can't be light, how can I activate the light in others?

I'm grateful for the ups and downs my mental climate journey has taken me on because I've learned the only way to change the world is by changing ourselves first. And the only way to *heal* the world is by healing ourselves. If we don't choose to actively work on our own healing, how can we serve the healing of others? If we can't find our light, how will we help others find theirs?

If a friend falls down a well, you don't want to jump down after them and say, "Hi, I thought you might want some company down here. At least now we're stuck together." Do that, and they'll look at you in disbelief and simply reply, "Idiot." Instead, you want to find a rope, muster all your strength, and help them out. The same goes for our healing work.



Although empathy and the ability to see and understand someone else's pain is a beautiful act in the moment, you don't help them in the long run by lowering yourself to the same level of pain. If you want to truly help someone, let them grieve as needed, waiting to offer a portal back into the light. They won't want to be stuck in Sorrowland forever, and when they're ready, they will seek out the light again. You get to be that light if you choose to be a conduit for healing, an anchor to the good energy so needed in this world.

When it comes to the world at large, I believe it's important we understand this idea of keeping the light burning. With all the pain surrounding you, more often than not, you might feel that to be a good citizen, you should shoulder the fears and sorrows of everyone around you. If you don't show them you're heartbroken and disturbed all the time—because how could you not be with everything going on in the world?—it might come across like you don't care. Therefore, it's almost easier to be angry and worried all the time because it's what you think is expected. Choosing to channel the light can seem scary, but that is also how you begin embodying the change we so desperately need.

When I chose to hurt myself to "feel the pain" of all the animals around the world, I wasn't helping anyone. I recognize that now. But it took me many years of active healing to get where I am today. I still have days when it's hard to keep the tears down, and when those days come, I allow myself to cry because when I allow myself to feel, I also allow myself to heal.

I want you to become a master at this. I want you to get so good at staying attuned to your feelings and emotions that you can process them effortlessly when needed, and continue to be a conduit of healing and light for yourself and for the world.



This work is not a "one and done" thing. Healing and emotional empowerment take practice, and just like with working out, to stay strong, you need to commit to it for the long haul. But similar to working out, once you've reached a certain physique and made your new normal strong and resilient, sticking to these habits will become second nature for you. It will be who you are—a healing vessel for change.

To me, climate healing relies on four pillars:

- 1. Start by recognizing that it's okay to feel and let yourself be one with your emotions. Ignoring your feelings will not make them go away. They will only build up inside, which can lead to anxiety and depression. Letting yourself feel is the first step in healing. You might feel scared by this, but your heart is stronger than you know, and if you practice tuning in to your emotions more often, you will soon learn how to let them flow through you with ease.
- 2. Once you've recognized it's okay to feel your emotions, no matter how difficult they are, it's important to remember you don't have to hold on to these feelings to make a difference. You're not a better activist because you're angry and worried all the time. In fact, you'll be much more effective if you choose to heal yourself and act from a place of strength, love, and light.
- 3. Understand that you're not alone. By talking about it with others, you activate your own healing, first of all, but you also allow others to start their healing process. When we share how we feel, we begin to understand we're not alone. That is a good first step in releasing pain. Also, when we come together in fear and grief, we feel like we have support, like there is hope. Hope is where the action grows.
- 4. This leads me to the last part—taking action. Pennsylvania State University psychology professor Janet Smith explains the fastest way out of anxiety is by feeling you have control. When you take action, you feel you have control. Whatever you can do to make a difference, no matter how small it may seem, do it. Become the change you wish to see, and slowly work yourself out of despair and into empowered action. (We'll talk about this a lot more in the Choosing Empowerment section.)

You can't grow abs by closing your eyes and dreaming about them. At some point, you have to get on the floor and do some crunches. The same goes for emotional resilience. You can't just tell yourself you want to feel better. You have to seek out activities that activate healing.

I prefer free, simple, and easy to access at all times activities. My favorite exercises for mental health are journaling, talking, and positive action. For free resources on this, visit www.theclimateoptimist.com/resources. But it also comes down to learning how to deal with awareness, and more importantly – growing your emotional resilience and fear mark.

Raising Your Fear Mark

Learning how to deal with negative news is something they don't teach you in school but absolutely should. Instead, it seems we get an overload of incredibly difficult information dumped on us without any help or guidance on how to actually *deal with it*. It's like we've forgotten that behind all our titles, outfits, and social media accounts, we're actually humans. We are living, breathing things with pumping blood and beating hearts, bodies with *feelings* and minds that process information way beyond what any robot would have. (I know robots are becoming astonishingly smart these days with cute "feelings" and all, but stay with me here.)

If you're anything like me, you may have experienced compassion overload. It gets to the point when you simply can't see another story about wildfires, oil spills, or school shootings—it's too much to take in. You reach a point when you *simply can't care anymore*. The world seems to be going under, and you feel there's nothing you can do but surrender to that fate.

If we're going under, so be it—I'm tapping out.

This is what happens when we run out of emotional storage. In *Climate Cure*, Jack Adam Weber calls it our fear mark: "Our fear mark is the degree of fear we can tolerate while remaining rational and skillful in our response to information. Until we develop awareness, our fears rule us."

Until we develop awareness, our fears rule us. In other words, it's not enough to be aware of the issue at hand. We also need to be aware of how it might make us feel. If we're blind to the fact that learning certain things hurts, we are powerless to properly handle the information. Raising our fear mark, then, means getting better at staying aware without getting overwhelmed.

Chances are if you're not aware of your fear mark or haven't been trained to raise it, you can't take that much. Someone you meet on the street could say something you're not ready to hear and your immediate response is, "Oh, I know, it's terrible. I don't want to talk about it."

That's fair. We don't have to talk about everything that's going on in the world (and I'm getting to that point shortly), but if our instant reaction is we don't want to know, we're keeping ourselves stuck in our current state of awareness. From there, it's impossible to grow.

If you don't understand your fear mark, you probably have a low threshold for bad news. You might *hear* the news, but you're not letting it actually touch you. If your fear mark is low, it's simply too

hard to handle difficult information. Instead, you close those ports and hope the painful feeling will pass by you and move on.

But we need to be aware, so ensuring we can handle difficult information is paramount. It's not enough to say we're ready. We have to actually *be* ready. That is where acknowledging our fear mark comes in. Because once we acknowledge it, we can begin to grow it.

In the beginning, your ability to take in negative news might be low, and that's okay. There's no need to overwhelm yourself, and by taking in bad news in bitesize pieces, you can get stronger and raise your fear mark over time. And if you can raise it really high, you can know what's going on in the world, actually *feel* it in your emotional body, without letting it overwhelm you. You'll be a super-compassionate being with the power to—in all honesty—change the world.



One of those super-compassionate people was Mother Teresa. I read she had to ignore homeless people on the street daily. It surprised me. I thought she would be so aware she could never ignore someone in need. But then I understood she *did* see, but she also recognized she couldn't help everyone. And part of being vividly aware and strong was being able to understand when you should act and when you should not.

If we try to be everything for everyone, we'll end up being nothing to anyone.

I live in New York. When I first moved here, I found it so difficult to go anywhere because whether you take the subway or walk down the street, you will pass by someone in need. Being a poor student at the time, it was difficult to know when to drop a dollar in their cup. I felt so ashamed and disappointed with myself. Who was I to ignore suffering?

But then I remembered what I had read about Mother Teresa and reminded myself not every battle was mine to fight. Simply recognizing others don't have it as good as me is sometimes enough.

I don't have enough money to feed every person experiencing homelessness I pass. That's just

a fact. I can choose to acknowledge I can't help everyone, or I can close my eyes and ignore the people suffering all around me. One requires strength and humility; the other is the easy way out. I realized that choosing not to see the suffering would be worse than acknowledging my economic shortcomings. It takes strength to see something, want to help, and at the same time accept that you can't always do so.

A couple of years later, I attended a practice run at a secret theater club where a group of acting students performed a sketch as if they were homeless. To practice, they had spent a couple of nights on the street with actual people experiencing homelessness (I was very impressed), and they said what they learned stunned them.

One man had told them something in particular that changed how they view people experiencing homelessness forever, and by sharing it on the stage, they did the same for me. This man had said what he was asking for, more than anything else, was to be seen. "It's okay if you can't give money or food," he had said. "We can understand that. But if you can just acknowledge that we're there, maybe give a nod and a smile if you feel comfortable doing so, that's enough." People experiencing homelessness feel their absolute worst when people pass by and act as if they aren't even there.

What that teaches us is that the most important thing we have in this world is the love and energy shared between people—known or unknown—and never to take the relationships we share for granted. (Think about that the next time someone yells at you for something. At least they recognize your existence!) I think it is also a great reminder that it's okay to acknowledge difficulty



and pain and tell ourselves we can't always step in and help. Think of Mother Teresa, the saint of all saints, who walked by the homeless and recognized she couldn't help them all individually. If she could do that, so can you, but you have to raise your fear mark first. You have to learn to get comfortable with the world as it is before you can fully take your place in it.

Here are five steps for how to deal with difficult and negative news. Practice these and you will notice your emotional resilience grow and your fear mark with it.

- 1.Find your balance. Too little awareness might lead to anxiety and stress, and too much can overwhelm you. Recognize that we're all on different resilience levels and some people can consume more negative news than others. By knowing yourself and your limits, you can begin to recognize when you feel overwhelmed and take a break. Keep it bitesize and grow your emotional resilience over time.
- **2.Practice healthy denial.** We all deny negative news to one degree or another. It would simply be impossible to live and function if we were to think about it all the time. Denial isn't always bad, and tuning out from time to time is essential for our wellbeing.
- 3.Mix in optimism. A good way to consume negative news is to follow up with something positive. That way you can remain aware without feeling like you lose yourself to anxiety and stress. It's okay to find reasons to smile amid all the bad and you—the everyday hero choosing to work on your emotional resilience—deserve it more than anyone. Seek out the good news too. Listen to uplifting music. Sing, dance, and enjoy life. Do that and you'll be much better equipped to do something about the things you're learning.
- **4.Talk about it.** By sharing what you're learning with others, you might find that you're not alone in your worries, which will help ease anxiety. Just keep in mind that others' emotional resilience might be very different from yours—tread lightly and with kindness.
- 5.Fear + Grief = Empowered Action. Grief alone can consume you. Fear alone can push you into a paralyzed state. But when combined in healthy doses, and applied to an attitude of wanting to make change, you can fuel it into empowered action. Don't just learn and let go—empower yourself and do something about it. Knowing what you know now, what can you do today to make it better? Choose to act and be the change, and be assured the world will follow.

The truth is that we are in this now, whether we like it or not. But we're in it together, and if we are able to change the narrative of the stories we tell ourselves, we could see these times for what they (actually) really are – a time for change. We choose our tomorrow today and the sooner we find the courage to start choosing change, the bigger our chances of creating a future that's not only different from what we know now but perhaps more beautiful than anything we've seen to date.



Will we make it through? Will we be able to reverse global warming and build a regenerative, thriving economy and world? Who knows. But what I do know is that right now, we have the power to try and everyone alive today gets a chance to participate in this journey toward a better world. I don't know about you but I think this makes for pretty exciting times to be alive!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —



Anne Therese is a TEDx Speaker, author, educator, and sustainable influencer who's passionate about changing the narrative on climate change so that we can act from courage and excitement, not fear.

Her book <u>The Climate Optimist Handbook</u> came out in 2022. Learn more at www.theclimateoptimist.com.

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD BY LISTENING

© 2023 ROBIN TICIC, ELISE KUSHNER, AND BRUCE ECKER

Adapted from <u>The Listening Book: How to Create a World of Rich Connections and Surprising Growth</u> by Actually Hearing Each Other. Reprinted with permission from Routledge.

Each time one of our psychotherapy clients tells us, "You're the first person who has ever really listened and tried to *understand* me!" we are struck yet again by how many people go through life without ever feeling really listened to, really heard, and really understood on a deep level by their closest people. Can those among us who haven't had the good fortune to receive such listening, understanding, and connection possibly provide that to *their* most important people? In living without feeling heard, one soldiers on, enduring a nameless despair and desolation of disconnection and aloneness, even when others are physically present, and without necessarily recognizing what's missing because it just seems to be the nature of human life. Depression is in many cases the mood of feeling hopelessly stranded in that disconnection and aloneness.

What explains the rarity of high-quality listening? Perhaps the cause of its rarity can be found in the very essence of such listening: You park yourself in silence, you forget about time, you forget about yourself, and you give the entire attention of your mind and heart to the other person. In other words, such listening is done from a state of mind that is relatively egoless. Could the unfamiliarity of that stance be why it's rare? If so, then cultivating not only the skills but also, more fundamentally, the *capacity* for that stance of true listening will be a major gain for the listener, a gain that could be viewed as spiritual growth.

Giving high-quality listening to someone is an act of remarkable loving-kindness that actually connects two selves internally. What can emerge from attuned listening and the connection it creates, beyond how good it feels in the moment to both receiver and giver, is also remarkable. People's behaviors, emotions, and thoughts that sometimes seem senseless or irrational when viewed from an external perspective, prove to make complete sense. That coherent sense exists and operates in a person's *interior* world of meaning, which actually becomes apparent when



deep listening goes there. Recognizing the coherence of one's own inner world is an illumination that can be freeing and life-changing. It can in turn engage the brain's innate capability to unlock the emotional conditioning of a lifetime through the process of memory reconsolidation, which we now understand thanks to neuroscience research since 2000 and extensive use of that process in psychotherapy. It is a natural process that occurs and creates liberating change also in daily life outside of psychotherapy. Each of us is equipped with this capability for change, and we can greatly help each other make use of it through...listening.

We change our world by listening

It's literally true: You can change the world by listening. In fact, you already do! We all do. Every choice we make about how to interact with others has ripple effects, making people's lives different from how they would have been without us.

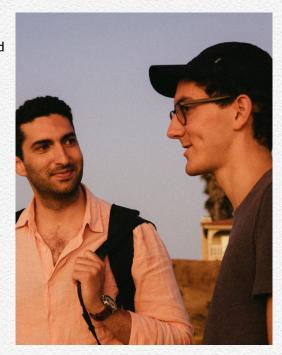
By honing our listening skills, all of us have the opportunity to enrich our interpersonal relationships dramatically, minimize conflicts, and maximize peaceful, respectful interactions with partners, children, relatives, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and colleagues. Each of us again and again has the possibility to change the world into a place of more caring, kindness, understanding, and acceptance of one another.

Have you experienced a relationship in which you feel free to express what you're really feeling,

free to be your authentic self, and be heard, seen and accepted as you are? If you have such a relationship, then you are truly fortunate. If, on the other hand, you long to be heard—really listened to and understood—then you share that longing with the vast majority of people around the world.

Just imagine feeling free to share any problem with a friend, knowing you'll be deeply understood, and not told what you should or shouldn't be feeling, believing, or doing. Imagine parents giving their children sensitive understanding of what they're feeling, experiencing, and needing, rather than failing to register or even disregarding all that, as though how they're feeling doesn't matter.

We humans have an innate need for deep, rich connection. We need to feel accepted and validated by others who are close to us. And in fact, the same connection with ourselves is just as necessary—though this is a novel idea to many people. Giving ourselves kindness and understanding dispels much inner conflict and distress, and makes room for inner shifts toward greater wellbeing.



All this is *true* wealth in life—a major source of happiness and stability. There's so much that we tend to strive for that we don't really need, and that therefore doesn't fulfill us even when attained. And all along, we can give and receive more of what we really *do* need for mental and emotional well-being.

The art of deep listening is the path to fulfilling those needs. We're talking about *conscious*, *intentional* listening for an empathic understanding of a person—a capability that is fascinating to cultivate and a joy to use! Learning about people—yourself included—by listening to them is generally the path of greatest satisfaction as well as least resistance, because virtually everyone wants to feel heard and understood. Listening is what connects us and brings to life the feeling that we are in one big human family.

Interpersonal communication consists of both listening *and* speaking, however, in our experience, it's listening that's more difficult and less developed for most people. And insufficient listening most often leaves one or more participants feeling alone and hurt.

We want to inspire you to look for opportunities to apply what you learn here to your relationships: listening to, hearing, and understanding the people in your life, allowing you to respond to them in new ways and at new levels, making your interactions with them more alive, more authentic, and more satisfying for you and for them.

As psychotherapists and practitioners of Coherence Therapy, we have spent much of our lives listening to people. We're also continuously working on ourselves to become better and better at listening to our clients, taking note of verbal and nonverbal cues, while also guiding them to pay attention and listen to themselves at new levels that produce deep, lasting change.

There's nothing mysteriously intricate or inscrutable about the skills and stances of high-quality listening. These skills are readily learnable by almost everyone—all that's required is that we stop doing many of the things we might normally do in reaction to what another person communicates. Instead, we stay closely with what was said or otherwise communicated, without giving advice or making any attempts to change anything about the person. We just meet that person right where he or she is. Of course, two individuals in a relationship may be at quite different points on the listening learning curve. That can entail a mutual adjustment having various delicate aspects. Although *simple* isn't necessarily *easy*, we think you'll find the rewards well worth the investment!



Interpersonal Connectors and Disconnectors

The stories in Part 1 of the book come from real life and real interactions between people. They are presented in a special format, with every story offering you a unique learning experience.

The speaker in each story tells about a meaningful experience with some other person—the listener. Sometimes it goes well, but more often than not there's an "ouch" moment for the speaker when the listener's response is significantly misattuned. You'll be invited into the emotional world of the speaker, who will explain how that experience feels.

We then rewrite the stories of misattunement with responses from the listener that make the speaker feel satisfyingly heard and understood. (In those altered replays, the portions of text that are repeated appear a shade lighter.)



It's the speaker's experience of the listener that is the overt focus of each story—because that's the best way for you, the reader, to advance your listening skills. That way, you'll be vicariously experiencing both roles, the speaker and the listener. In the position of the speaker, you'll be sampling how it feels to receive either the needed good listening or the "ouch" of poor listening. In the position of the listener, you will recognize some of your own skillful and less-than-skillful listening responses to others, and of course you'll expand your repertoire of skillful responses. What could be more effective for vividly understanding how to be a good listener?

So, what about the *speaker's* ability to listen and really hear and receive the responses of a good listener? The speaker in each story is the person who happens to be having an emotional experience, whether troubling or joyous, and wants or needs to tell the other person about that experience, often to help clarify it. A good listener doesn't expect the speaker, who is in the midst of an emotional experience, to be able to use his or her best listening skills at the same time. High-quality listening responses are ones that an emotional speaker can most fully hear and let in. The invaluable effects of better listening to *oneself* also become apparent.

The stories highlight patterns that people often use in everyday communication — patterns that are interpersonal "connectors" as well as many that are interpersonal "disconnectors." Every time a connector is used and the speaker feels heard and understood, you'll see a "heart-and-ear" icon. And when the speaker feels especially pained by not being heard and understood, you'll find an "ouch" icon.

Olivia's Story

Background

Hey, I'm Olivia, 17 years old. You won't believe what's been going on! My boyfriend, Tony, dumped me for another girl! After we were together for six whole months. That's a really long time, and I was sure it would last forever. I didn't see this coming. I've had other boyfriends, but they were so superficial compared to Tony, the great love of my life.

I cry all day. I wake up in the middle of the night and realize I was crying in my sleep. It hurts so much. I spent the first day—it's been six days now—trying to make it not be true, but it kept being true. I spent the second and third days realizing that I couldn't change reality and there was nothing more I wanted to live for. I thought about killing myself. Fortunately for me, my mom kept a close eye on me and helped me through that. Then I fell into a deep depression, where I've been stuck for the last few days. Will the pain ever end?

I don't really want to talk to anyone, because I'm convinced no one can understand how deep my pain goes. My cousin Mia called—she's 18—and my mom told her I didn't want to talk to anyone, but Mia knew I was really, really down and she wouldn't take no for an answer, so she came over anyway earlier today.

What happened

Me (Olivia) (joyless, flat, not wanting to talk to Mia): Hey, Mia, what's up.

Mia: What's up with you? How're you doing? I've been worried sick about you.

Me (Olivia) (totally flat): I'm okay.

ovall

Mia: Oh, I'm sooo glad to hear you're okay! That means sooo much to me!

DISCONNECTOR - disregarding signals of distress or need

What I'm feeling

How come Mia heard my words "I'm okay" but didn't notice that I didn't *look or sound* okay? I haven't washed my hair in a week, and I'm obviously depressed. But she seems to be ignoring clear signs that I'm in a bad state. It's as if she's listening for what she *wants* to hear, rather than actually tuning in to *me*.

Mia: I've been beside myself with worry.

Me (Olivia) (not knowing what to say): Yeah...



Mia: You've given us all a scare! I could hardly sleep I was so worried about you.

DISCONNECTOR - **shifting the focus onto oneself**, specifically: burdening the sufferer with one's own worries

It feels as if she's pressuring me to make her feel better, when *I'm* the one in huge pain right now. It feels weird that she's dumping *her* worries on *my* shoulders.

I wish people could notice my obvious condition, not just the words I say. When I said "I'm okay" it was just to fill the silence and get her off my back, but I definitely didn't look or sound okay in any way!

I'm the one who was dumped by the love of my life, and I'm the one who's in this intense pain *all* the time. It feels like an unfair and impossible burden for me to deal with not only my feelings but also Mia's feelings about *my* issue. Mia really let me down in a big way by being so blind to that and pulling at me to make *her* feel better. She isn't the friend I thought she was—and that's yet *another* loss at the same time!

What I needed instead

Me (Olivia) (joyless, flat, not wanting to talk to Mia): Hey, Mia, what's up.

Mia: I just came to check up on you – I've been thinking about you.

Me (Olivia) (totally flat): I'm okay.

Mia: Hmm, I don't think so. I'm not *that* easy to fool! And I know how bad it hurts to be dropped by a boyfriend. Look, I'm here for you, okay? If you want to talk or maybe need a shoulder to cry on, just let me know, okay?

(2)

CONNECTOR - noticing incongruence among words, emotions, and behaviors

CONNECTOR – acknowledging what you're noticing, specifically:

expressing caring recognition of visible distress rather than
going along with disregarding it

CONNECTOR - offering an expression of interest and caring understanding



Me (Olivia): Yeah...okay.

Mia (giving Olivia a hug): Okay, sweetie, is it alright if I drop by tomorrow for a couple of minutes?

CONNECTOR – **showing warmth and generosity of spirit**, specifically:

offering ongoing contact and accompaniment through the distress

Me (Olivia): I guess so.

Questions for discussion

- 1. Can you describe a time when you spoke words that were very different from how you were really feeling? What motivated you to handle it that way?
- 2. Have you been visibly in distress and experienced people responding to you by telling you about their distress about your issue, while largely disregarding your crisis?
- Can you describe a situation in which you were talking to someone who was in the midst of an intensely distressing situation? Try to describe how you were feeling during that interaction.
- 4. How did you interact with the person who was in intense distress? If you could do it over again, what might you do differently?

(The following "disconnectors" and "connectors" – excerpted from Part 2 of the book – are those that appear in the above story.)

Disregarding signals

Usually there is much more to notice about what others are communicating than is obvious at first glance. It's not only the spoken words that express what people are experiencing, but also their tone of voice, their posture, their tempo, their eye contact or lack thereof, and much more. Skilled listeners notice all of these signals, guiding them to respond in sensitively attuned ways that can connect deeply.

We humans, though, are so often focused—first and foremost—on our own experiences, expectations, and needs, and we perceive other people and their communications through our own, very personal filters. These filters can lead us at times to miss or disregard the signals that others are sending.

Often the most difficult signals to receive and recognize from others are signals of distress and unmet needs. Such signals may feel burdensome, or we may feel too unskilled and unequipped to address such areas, or a current difficulty with our own circumstances or state of mind could make it unworkable to focus on the other person's emotional dilemma.

Shifting the focus onto oneself

A listener might prematurely take away the focus of attention from the speaker and put it on himor herself due to a number of different types of reaction. That can happen, for instance, when the listener has a strong personal reaction, whether positive or negative, to what the speaker is experiencing or relating. It's natural at that moment for the listener's attention to become focused internally on that strong response. At that point, though, the speaker is likely to feel the loss of real listening. In another type of attention-shifting reaction, the listener may resonate strongly with aspects of the speaker's experience that feel very similar to his or her own experiences. Then it can be tempting to steer the conversation away from the speaker's experience and onto one's own, perhaps with the helpful intention of supportively showing how well the listener can understand the speaker's experience. That can work well if the listener is mindful enough to be quite brief and to clearly invite the speaker to resume. Then that brief sharing functions well as a connector, but it can turn into a disconnector if the listener becomes absorbed in a prolonged sharing and never passes the microphone back to the speaker.

Let's consider a woman whose business hasn't been prospering recently, and she's telling her friend about her large business expenses and small income. She's weighing her options and comparing what the consequences might be if she keeps the business running versus closing it down. The friend, who has himself had some desperate struggles with finances throughout his adult life, becomes visibly agitated hearing about this set of challenges and tells her, "What you're dealing with really touches a nerve for me, and my anxiety is ramping up as I think about what you could be doing with all that rent money and the other expenses you're paying for!" His emotional reaction has abruptly redirected the focus of the conversation to himself and how her problem is problematic for him.



She immediately sees that no more discussion of her problem is possible and, even if she feels sympathetic toward his distress, she may now feel disconnected from her friend, as well as disappointed and frustrated by his sudden lack of capacity to provide the helpful listening that she needs.

He could largely avoid those negative effects and maintain connection with her if with transparency he had said, "I wish I could help you with your problem, but I'm getting really agitated just listening, because I have so many money problems of my own! I'm really sorry to cut you off from telling me more about it. I hope we can resume some other time soon." His honest explanation and his apology are effective connectors that preserve their rapport even if she is disappointed.

Noticing incongruence among words, emotions, and behaviors

Our communication to other people comes across as most believable and authentic, and therefore serves as a connector, when all aspects of our behavior are consistent or congruent with each other. That means that our verbal communication matches our facial expression, our body posture, and our actions. When there are discrepancies, the non-verbal messages speak louder than words.

Imagine saying to someone, "I'm so glad you got that promotion!" in a nearly monotone voice as you look across the room at what others are doing. That person will notice and feel that your message of gladness isn't genuine. Imagine your partner saying, "I'm listening to everything you're telling me," but at the same time being visibly absorbed in some other activity. You won't be convinced that you have your partner's full attention at all.

Imagine asking a friend how things are and that person replies "Everything's fine" while face and gestures suggest worry and tension. That's your cue to consider checking more closely. "Glad everything's fine," you might say, "but is there something at the moment?" Lightly inquiring into the other's hint of distress is an important connector that signals, "You matter, and I care how you are." This opens the door for others to share more, if they choose to do so, without pressuring them to reveal anything they prefer to keep private.

Acknowledging what you're noticing

The idea of acknowledging what you're noticing couldn't be much simpler, at first glance. And yet it's a crucially important capability that threads its way throughout the entire set of listening skills supporting interpersonal connection.

You might express what you're noticing as "I see you're troubled" or "We're having a difference of opinion" or "You seem fulfilled by your work" or "I'm enjoying how well we're understanding each other about this." Each of those four examples consists simply of an explicit, transparent, honest naming of what kind of personal experience is happening, whether for the other person, or for oneself, or in the interaction, without getting into the particular contents of the experience. We can develop the habit of momentarily taking a bird's-eye view and asking ourselves, "What's happening here in the room right now?"

Some people find it easier to comment on what's happening in the room when it's something positive or uncontroversial. However, when we've noticed the other person give some indication of distress or a troubling situation, perhaps indirectly, it's then particularly important to acknowledge the difficulty of the dilemma—rather than going along with disregarding it—

even if doing so might feel somewhat awkward. A broadly useful response is along these lines: "You mentioned that you're dealing with xyz. I imagine that could be challenging." That clearly acknowledges the distress signal with a tactful touch of sympathy, and respectfully leaves it to the other person to decide whether or not to say more about it. If the other person is clearly expressing distress and we're not sure how to approach that but want to respond with acknowledgement, we might say, "Oh, I see, that's quite a troubling situation. I wonder if it's preoccupying you..."

Offering an expression of interest and caring understanding

Empathizing is one of the greatest connectors on earth! It's an absolutely essential component of understanding anyone at a deeply meaningful level. Empathizing means that as the listener we're aiming to experience a vicarious sampling of the other person's subjective experience. How does it feel to be that person in that situation? We can't really know, of course, but we can try for a degree of such intersubjective understanding through a combination of close listening and our emotional openness to feeling the other's experience.

Empathizing leads us to respond with a comment such as, "So, you're feeling very worried about her, aren't you..." Receiving such empathy is an experience of "feeling felt" (a beautifully apt phrase coined by psychiatrist Daniel Siegel). The person feels caringly accepted, rather than criticized or pathologized, for how he or she is, and might then move on toward further self-understanding or problem-solving, to whatever extent is fitting. Compare that response to, "You worry too much about things." Empathizing is completely devoid of criticizing or pathologizing, as well as advice-giving or any attempt to fix or change anything. Empathizing is such a precious gift because it enables other people to feel not only seen and understood in what they are experiencing, but also to some degree tenderly accompanied, which reduces aloneness. The accompaniment itself is deeply valuable because it tells people that they are not all alone with whatever is being experienced and felt.



Concern about reinforcing negative feelings or beliefs stops some people from expressing empathy, but that is a mistaken view. Nor does expressing empathy mean that the person empathizing shares or is agreeing with the other's views or feelings. It means only that the empathizing person is able, to some extent, to have a subjective sense of what the other is experiencing, and to let the other know that. Often there comes a clear response from the other person indicating that he or she feels intimately understood.

A surprising discovery that many people make when practicing empathetic listening is the large overlap among us, at the deepest level, of our basic human needs. We all thrive when receiving thoughtful, nurturing connection.

Showing warmth and generosity of spirit

Who comes to mind when you read the phrase "warmth and generosity of spirit"? Something in us instinctively admires and values people who radiate those qualities. Being on the receiving end of such kindness is a true blessing.

As listeners we have the opportunity, every day, over and over, to emit some warmth and generosity of spirit. Whenever it's apparent that someone is in need or distress to any degree, that's a very real opportunity to be kind and generous in response, without expecting anything concrete in return.

Of course, it's a choice that has to be made in the moment. Sometimes one's own situation or state of mind really requires letting that opportunity pass. In that case, it's still always possible to disengage with a touch of kind regard rather than cold disregard—for example, by saying sincerely, "Sorry, I'm really on overload right now. I wish you all the best, though!" It can be interesting to examine which needs of one's own are standing in the way, which also opens up the opportunity to explain some of that transparently to the other person, if appropriate.

If the answer inside is yes, then we can offer listening, caring, and understanding to the person in need, and possibly even some practical, helpful action. This surely is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other.

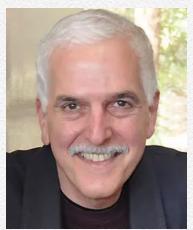


Robin Ticic, BA, HP Psychotherapy is in private practice near Cologne, Germany, specializing in trauma therapy. For many years Robin served as a psychologist for the Psychotraumatology Institute of the University of Cologne. She is a certified trainer of Coherence Therapy and conducts clinical workshops internationally. She is coauthor of <u>Unlocking the Emotional Brain:</u> <u>Eliminating Symptoms at Their Roots Using Memory Reconsolidation</u> and author of the parenting guide <u>How to Connect with Your Child</u>, with extensive experience in parent counseling, courses and

presentations. Robin has been honored for her community service.



Elise Kushner, BA, HP Psychotherapy lives and works in Cologne, Germany, as practitioner of Coherence Therapy, certified trainer of Coherence Therapy and Coaching, systemic coach, and trainer in the areas of interpersonal communication, coaching competencies for leaders, and gender awareness. She has been a guest lecturer at the Furtwangen University. Elise has served as consultant for multiple authors in her areas of expertise. She is also a composer and choral director and sings in an oldies band.



Bruce Ecker, MA, LMFT is co-originator of Coherence Therapy and coauthor of <u>Unlocking the Emotional Brain: Eliminating Symptoms</u> at Their Roots Using Memory Reconsolidation; the Coherence Therapy Practice Manual & Training Guide; and <u>Depth Oriented</u>

Brief Therapy: How To Be Brief When You Were Trained To Be Deep and Vice Versa. Clarifying how transformational change takes place is the central theme of Bruce Ecker's clinical career, and he has contributed many innovations in concepts and methods of experiential psychotherapy. Since 2006 he has driven the clinical

field's recognition of memory reconsolidation as the core process of transformational change and has developed the application of this brain research breakthrough to advancements in therapeutic effectiveness and psychotherapy unification. Based in New York City, Bruce has taught in clinical graduate programs, is a frequent presenter at conferences and workshops internationally, and leads the team of research associates at the Coherence Psychology Institute.

LABYRINTH

© 2023 BETH KURLAND, PhD

I've lost my roadmap or shall I say outgrown it
like my daughter who outgrew her beloved dress and kept trying to squeeze into it
poor thing that could no longer hold her
and burst at the seams
threads coming undone and all.

I came on retreat because my GPS isn't working, darn thing and I thought some quiet would do me good unplugging from the usual distractions of life to see what rises up in the silence.

I walked the path of the butterfly
and nestled into the arms of the Copper Beech tree
like a wise elder
with its deep steady roots and outstretched branches
holding the truth of nature I would rather not see
of the changing landscape of 56 years,
the pang of impermanence catching my breath,
the illusions of youth replaced with the gnarled and knotted bark of trunk
that has seen its share of passing storms the babies I birthed, a distant memory as they morph into young adults
ready to share their gifts with the world.

In the labyrinth it all becomes clear
as the sun, just past crest of sky and beginning its descent,
becomes more beautiful as it casts its light through leaves
like a visible dance that will end in a firework of color spilled across the sky.

But for now, at this moment in time

the sun illuminating the path

I walk and walk – one foot in front of the next

on gravel and stone and earth,

connected with the companion footsteps and soundscape of my fellow travelers beside me

no destination on this winding path leading to center.

It is all complete – this magnificent moment of presence

Everything is here. It always has been.

In this labyrinth surrounded by wooded forest friends

It is a homecoming — this journey

each new step a homecoming.

Circling the truth of this

I relax into the light, feel my place on this patch of earth and continue to walk toward center.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR -

Beth Kurland, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, Tedx speaker, and author of three award winning books: <u>Dancing on</u>
The Tightrope: Transcending the Habits of Your Mind and
Awakening to Your Fullest Life; The Transformative Power of
Ten Minutes: An Eight Week Guide to Reducing Stress and
Cultivating Well-Being; and <u>Gifts of the Rain Puddle: Poems,</u>
Meditations and Reflections for the Mindful Soul. She has a
forthcoming book due for release in early 2024.

Beth is passionate about teaching mindfulness informed practices and mind-body strategies to help people cultivate whole person health and well-being. She is excited to offer online mind-body coaching services. Visit BethKurland.com to learn more. You can also find her free meditations on Insight Timer, and her blogs on Psychology Today.

WALKING THE CAMINO

© 2022 RADHULE WEININGER, PHD, MD

Sitting in a little bar in the Spanish town of Logrono, sipping a hot and strong café longo, for the first time I have the inner quiet to reflect and write. This is the last day of my personal 12-day Camino. Bella, my daughter, went back to school a few days ago. Ben, my son, surprised us by deciding to walk on for another 5 weeks or so to Santiago de Compostela, the end point of this journey.

Many younger and older people are walking through the beautiful Spanish countryside, meeting in villages and towns, sharing food, drinks, and stories. There is an etiquette of openness, friendliness, and yes, love and respect for the questions each person is carrying.



Spanish countryside

This is the third time I am walking the Camino, the ancient pilgrimage path crisscrossing Europe. This journey is magical. When I need to take a time out from the daily routine, or when it is time to reflect on my life, on my intentions, on my priorities and on what is meaningful in my life, some time on the Camino "does the job." Having just turned 65 years old, I know that a change in pace is ahead. Maybe not retirement, but discernment about what is calling me most in a life as service.

Peter from Toronto and his brother Nils from Ottawa, as well as Rob and Sandy from Tuscan have just retired. They want to have time to reflect about the next phase of their lives. They seem to be carrying a common question about what makes life meaningful after "bread-work" is over. Peter has been having some health scares on the path. Now he is going very slowly, his bag being transported from one hotel to another. Peter has become very close to his brother Nils. The retired EU attaché told me how much he now savors every moment. Everyone can make the Camino as comfortable or rough and tumble as they want it to be.

Ben's spontaneously forming group of walking companions, who hike from one hostel to the next, and are between 18 and 35 years old. All of them sleep in bunk beds, where a night costs about 7 Euros. Inexpensive "pilgrims meals" are offered everywhere. Max from Germany, Ming from Singapore, Pascal from France, and Martino from Italy are "in-between" jobs. Ming was tired of the advertising job that she held for seven years. Now she wants to inquire about what is next. Pascal wants to do something more meaningful than the monotone job he had before. He is pondering about going back to school to become an environmental engineer. Martino from Milan is not sure about his



Ben and friends

studies in economics as he feels a strong calling to become a therapist; to reflect on his hopes and fears, he decided to walk the Camino. Strangely enough, Max, a German computer engineer, and Shawn, a NY lawyer who just passed the bar exam, are wrestling with similar questions. All of them are called to work supporting others, to live their life in a more meaningful way, and many of them told me about their conflict between financial concerns and more altruistic aspirations. These are my son Ben's walking buddies. Ben is also wondering what kind of a meaningful life might be ahead for him with his product design degree. His five-year design and marketing career in London has just ended.

While there are long talks when walking or gathering for a break, in the evening there is time for a good meal, the red wine of the region, and a lot of laughter. What is interesting is that old and young are mixing, at least quite often. Some of the young folks found out that I am a meditation teacher and therapist, and I was struck to be met by so much curiosity and many questions. "What is meditation? How does it work?" Those who tried to meditate before want to have advice on how to make their practice more effective. I must still answer five text-inquiries on what books to read and what courses to go to. Jokingly my husband suggested that I could become a wandering Camino meditation advisor.

A group of Irish girls from Donegal, three nursing students, are struggling with their belief in the Catholic religion. Who is God? Is following Jesus and Christianity the same? How does a spiritual life and a religious life differ? Gio, an 18-year-old student from Rome, is happy to discuss those questions with everybody around him. There is so much space in the Spanish countryside, and so much love in the air, that there has been enough room for all those questions to be held with care and openness. As fear and contraction recedes, love persists.



Walking the Camino

For a few days I had been feeling quite sad myself. Pain about old losses in our family life had come up. I had been feeling my kids' and my own hurt. When I walk the Camino, I often meditate for a few hours a day while walking. Mindfully setting one foot in front of the other helps me calm my mind and allows me to keep my heart open. Practices, originating in Dzogchen and Mahamudra, are now becoming accessible and relevant for us humans in 21st century confusion and angst. Resting in awake awareness while rhythmically treading the path makes it possible for me to hold my feelings in a "field of care." I realize that I can trust this "web of life," this immeasurable, non-dual "groundless ground of being and becoming." This much wider and generous perspective makes it possible to see life as sacred and to feel a sense of heart-opening and love for all of life.

On one day in the very beginning, when things were particularly hurtful, a quiet voice emerged inside me: "Trust the Camino." Trust the Camino? It is hard to trust life and have faith that difficulties will resolve when there is anguish. Yet there is something about walking the Camino, and maybe about the hundred thousand or more people who walked this path for 1200 years

before me, that contributes to its energy. "Re ligio," the root word for religion, means to reconnect. But re-connect with what? Re-connect with ourselves, re-connect with the sacred, reconnect with the "Great Mystery," re-connect with what is essential and meaningful? Re-connect with what has been lost, reconnect with the wound deep inside? When there is family hurt, the grab, the pull towards reactivity is strongest. Then we are shaken in our identity, sometimes to the core. It helps me immensely to practice resting in the field aspect of awareness, because the spaciousness, wisdom, and love of this quality of being makes it more tolerable to remain in equanimity, to stay open-hearted, and to trust that we will all grow and develop through this difficulty.



Ben on the Camino

Last night at 9:30 pm Ben and I sat for a last evening meal in this beautiful plaza surrounded by ornate old houses. Gazillions of Spanish families and friends were having their Friday evening get-togethers. Ben and I were wondering what it is about the Camino that makes it so magical and therapeutic. He suggested, "taking a designated time out from making money or from doing repetitive work tasks, having everyday a focus that really motivates you to find your edge, being willing to unconditionally connect with others, holding the intention to welcome something more than yourself, and to have the courage to discover something new."

There is one big question, which I heard on the Camino over and over again. There seems to be a common deep search meaning. The Camino gives space for this search. We are all walking on a road through life. How can our life path become a Camino? How does it reach that depth, aliveness, and meaning?

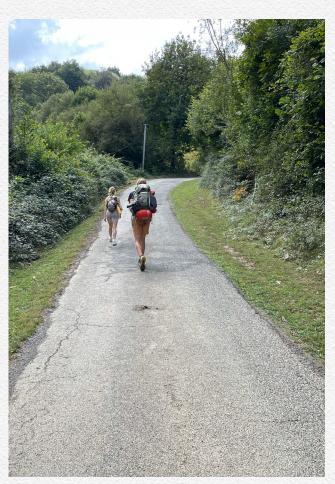
Not all of us are privileged to walk the actual Camino de Santiago but we can follow some alternate steps to transform our life path.

- We can be caring and open-hearted enough to choose a worthy purpose that contributes to more than just our own wellbeing
- We can aim to fully understand and appreciate that we an inseparable part of an interdependent web of life
- We can take responsibility for what kind of life we want to live, and decide what we consider as worthwhile
- As we wander along, we can practice stabilizing our wild mind with mindfulness, and keeping our heart soft and open with compassion practice
- We can rest in the vast, immeasurable field of awake awareness and receive a resource
 of energy and a perspective that is wider than our personal sense of identity. We can feel
 compassion arising in a wider space than the personal.
- We can free ourselves from outcome, and just do what we do out of love.
- As we take responsibility and pursue a worthy life goal, we can enjoy a deep sense of meaning and inner well-being.

The more of us that journey in this way, the more likely the world will become a healthier place.

Now, four weeks later, I am back home while Ben is still walking through fields and forests with a group of his Camino friends. Tomorrow they will arrive in Santiago de Compostela, the official finishing point. While walking with them, I felt inspired by the many young folks, well, people of all ages, who felt inspired and enriched by the walk. Therefore, I want to let you know how to plan your own trip.

First, the Camino can be experienced anywhere and anytime that you hold your life questions with awareness and care. Second, there are some concrete pieces of advice I'd like to give to you if you are drawn to walk the European Camino:



Walking the Camino

When you come from America, you must fly there. We collected credit card points all year and were able to use those to get our tickets. The closest major airports from oversees are Paris and Madrid. There are different places from which to start the Camino, but the most well-known town is St. Jean Pied de Port in France close to the Pyrenees. You get there by train from Paris.

You can walk the Camino very inexpensively, for example, you can sleep in €7 (~ \$7) hostels per night and find cheap and good food on the way. Spain is not expensive at all, and people are very friendly, especially when you walk the Camino. If you want to travel more comfortably, you can easily find little hotels or auberges on each step of the way. You can carry your own backpack, or have your luggage shipped from one place to the next.

For example, my son Ben left his \$7 hostel every morning before six, and carried his own backpack. My daughter Bella and I shared a room in different little auberges,



The path of the Camino

and our luggage was transported for us. My husband and I, both about 65 years old,

found a company called "Follow The Camino" that planned the trip for us. My son would greatly dislike this amount of predictability but the Camino can be what you want it to be. Everywhere you will find friendly companions and people willing to help so you do not need a guided group. Trust the Camino! My son discovered several phone apps that help to guide you on the trail. He recommends CaminoTool, Camino, Eroski Consumer, and Camino Ninja App (and there are others as well).

I will walk the Camino again next year, and I hope Bella and Ben, and maybe Josh will join. It would be wonderful to go as a group of meditators, and plan on a few hours a day of walking meditation. We could start with a morning sit, or gather when arriving in the afternoon. If you are interested, please contact mindfulheartprograms.org or radhuleweiningerphd.com.

Let's walk together!



Ben and a friend

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Radhule Weininger, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice, and founder of the non-profit Mindful Heart Programs. She is a teacher of mindfulness, compassion and non-dual awake-awareness practices, as well as Buddhist psychology. She began her meditation studies in 1980 at Black Rock Monastery in Sri Lanka. For the past 20 years, she has been mentored in her teaching by Jack Kornfield, in her interest in Engaged Buddhism by Joanna Macy, and in non-dual awake awareness practices by Daniel Brown. Her second book "Heart Medicine: How to Stop

Painful Patterns and Find Freedom and Peace-at Last," with forewords by HH The Dalai Lama and Joanna Macy, was released in 2021. "Heartwork: The Path of Self-Compassion," with a foreword by Jack Kornfield was also published by Shambala Publications. Radhule is faculty at Pacifica Graduate School and, together with her husband Michael Kearney, an author and physician, she has been teaching about self-care and resilience to caregivers locally and internationally for over twenty years. Radhule and her husband have six adult children and step-children, and a dog, Lucy.

SKILLFUL MEANS

<u>Your Skillful Means</u>, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Creative Stress Management

PURPOSE/EFFECTS

All of us, at one time or another, experience stress or worry and we can feel lonely or overwhelmed by it. It can be a scary time, and it's not unusual to feel that we have no options or help. This exercise is a way to learn and practice an alternative stress management technique that involves identifying what is stressing you out in a creative non-verbal, process and then clarifying what resources/allies would be helpful.

METHOD

Summary

Using art materials (18X24 sheet of paper and 2D art materials of your choice). Fold paper in half and create an image of your stress on the inside of the folded piece of paper. When finished with the "stress image," close the paper so that you're looking at a blank, front page.

Now, imagine that there is someone or something that can help you with this feeling. If it's hard for you to do this for yourself, think about what you would offer someone you care about who was feeling stressed out. How would you communicate your care and compassion through words and behavior? Try to steer away from giving advice or directing change

Long Version

The "stress image": 15-20 minutes

You're going to create an image that represents your stress/worry/anxiety as an abstract concept,

a human, or even a monster. After we've created the stress image, we're going to spend some time reflecting on what would help. This can help you start to recognize how and when stress shows up in your life and what resources/tools you have available so that you can get through it in a more sustainable way.

REMEMBER: You can NOT do this wrong. This is a learning experience-as much as you can, focus on the process and not the finished product. Let yourself go slowly and take your time with the image making. If you find that you're done before the 15-20 minutes passes, you could journal about what you've discovered or spend some time noticing how your body responds to the image you created.

Let's begin: Fold your paper in half, like a book. You're going to start by working on the inside of the book.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Try to reflect on the idea that stress/worry/anxiety is mostly an unseen thing, but what if we could see it? What would it look like? If you had to describe it, where would you begin? Is it a figure with head and limbs, an animal or mythical creature, or is it more abstract? What shape does it take? Is it huge, tiny, tall, wide, spiky, smooth? What color is it?

Now reflect on the personality of your stress/worry/anxiety. Does it speak loudly or stay silent? What does it care about and how does it express its cares?

Once you feel connected to this feeling, turn towards your art materials and let's create an image of it. Help yourself keep track of time by setting a timer for 15-20 minutes.

Thoughtful transition to the next part of the process:

Let's shift our attention now by first closing the paper so that you have a blank page/the front of the book facing up. Start to notice how you're feeling in this moment: No right or wrong answers here. Be curious and observe your mind and body without needing to change or even understand what you're thinking and feeling.

Make any adjustments you need to be sitting comfortably and let's turn our attention to our breathing-just notice the inhale and the exhale for a few breaths-before we move on.



The "helper image": 15-20 minutes

Imagine that someone you care for is experiencing that image of your stress. Steering clear of giving advice, or asking them to change or feel differently, how would you express your care? Your support? Your compassion?

What would that support, and care look like, sound like, feel like? What would you want them to think of or remember?

Once you feel connected to this feeling, turn back towards your art materials and create an image of this experience. Again, set a timer here for 15-20 minutes.

Thoughtful transition to closing:

Come back to the present moment by sitting with this new image and notice how your body responds. How does it feel in your face and jaw? Your neck and shoulders? Does your breathing feel different? How about your tummy? Your hips and legs? How do your feet feel on the ground?

Imagine that you can breathe this feeling in and let it expand throughout your entire body. Really let yourself have this feeling. Head to toe. Left side to Right side. Front to back.

Come back to the weight of your body sitting in the chair. Notice the sounds inside and outside of the room. Slowly blink open your eyes and slowly look at each wall. Notice how you feel now.

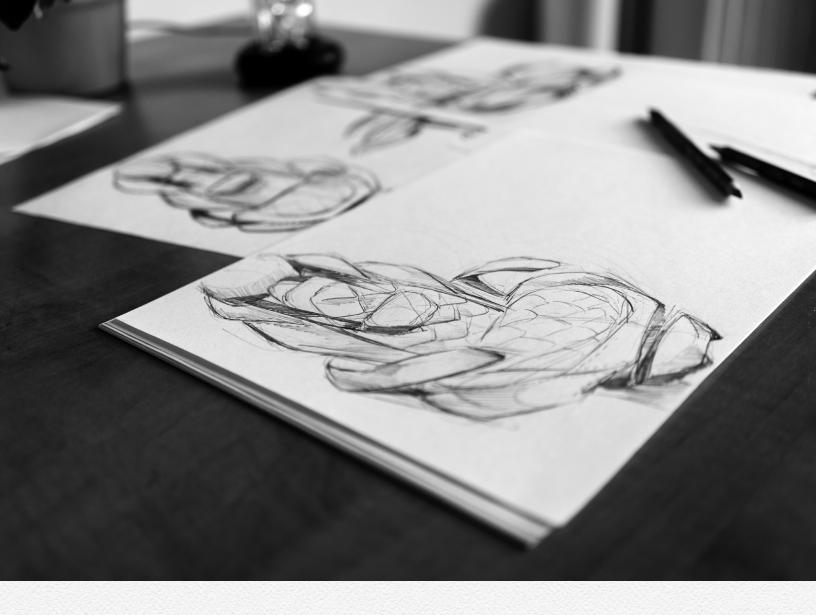
HISTORY

This experience is combination of two therapeutic exercises. The first part is an extended, creative version of a "worry journal," which is especially helpful for those that struggle with overly anxious and worried minds. The second part is informed by EMDR - finding resources and allies. This exercise is for anyone who could benefit from identifying internal strengths and resources.

If using 2D art materials isn't for you, try collaging with old magazines or tissue paper. If you'd like to try 3D art making, grab some clay or reuse/repurpose stuff around your house! There are no limits or restrictions in what materials you can use for this exercise.

EXTERNAL LINKS

What is Art Therapy?



Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.

The Wellspring Institute

For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute.

If you enjoy receiving the Wise Brain Bulletin, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Wellspring Institute. Simply visit WiseBrain.org and click on the Donate button. We thank you.