Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Social and Emotional Strategies For Resilience — An Interview with Coryn Nadeau, Clinical Art Therapist

Jenn Robbins · Wednesday, June 24th, 2020

I don't know about your house, but mine has found a rhythm. It's a new one, and its "familiar unfamiliarity" is unnerving. Here is the scene. It's 3 am, again. After three hours of Netflix, unsupervised Google searches, and TikTok, my 14-year-old son hums along at the stove, making pancakes. I blindly stumble in, reaching for a glass of water, hoping a little hydration will help. I have abandoned attempts to breathe myself to sleep while saying Hail Mary's and willing the cat to walk in. After gulping down some water, I turn to my son, annoyed. He slides a pancake onto his plate. I tell him to go to bed; he says "no". I tell him he's going to get in trouble; he asks me if I would like some tea. I say "You can't grow if you don't sleep." He replies: "I'll sleep in". This seems logical enough, so I tell him not to stay up too late, and I leave. That's it. So yes, we have a rhythm, but this one is disturbing.

Two weeks ago, I hit the wall — and started attending self-help webinars. The most impactful one I attended, and the one I most want to share, was entitled: "Building Emotional Resilience: COVID's Impact on Student Mental Health and Strategies for Success". In it, clinical art therapist, educator, transformational coach, and mother, Coryn Nadeau, offered us effective strategies to improve the emotional resilience of our kids, but what I especially took away was how much I needed to improve my own communication. And how necessary it is to start taking self-care seriously so that I can be the person I want to be. Although we may be experiencing collective trauma, we don't have to come out traumatized. Realizing this was so encouraging for me that I wanted to share it with all of you: there are real strategies that adults and kids can use to come out of this moment more resilient, more peaceful, and with better communication skills than ever. I want all of that, just as much for me, as for my student, my child. I contacted Ms. Nadeau, who is currently the National Social Emotional Learning lead at Fusion Academy, a progressive, nationwide private school. Here is an edited version of our conversation on how to grow emotional resilience in ourselves and our children.

Jenn Robbins: *Coryn, you have an extensive and varied background as a therapist in private practice, and in educational settings. During your presentation, "Building Emotional Resilience: COVID's Impact on Student Mental Health and Strategies for Success", you spoke of the collective trauma we are experiencing as a country. Will you speak more about this?*

Coryn Nadeau: So first let's talk about trauma and the context of this time right now…which ultimately opens up the conversation about collective trauma. Trauma is an event, situation, or perceived threat of death or serious injury that overwhelms a person's ability to protect their

wellbeing and cope the way they normally do with difficult situations in their life. This is not just a bad day or stressful situation; it is way more severe, and there is a psychological and/or physical response to a stressful experience. Keep in mind, a traumatic event does not always mean it will result in trauma, because of protective factors each individual may have. So right now, the country is in a time of pandemic and acknowledging systemic racial oppression & injustice of the black community. We are acknowledging both these things are big and alive in the world right now and demand our care and attention for healing. When multiple traumas happen in one's life, that can result in complex trauma.

Collective trauma is when people experience the same phenomena or event, sharing trauma on a larger scale. There are other types of trauma that could be on the table as well; including, vicarious, racial, and inter-generational trauma for some folks. In short, we are all going through traumatic events right now, collectively; however, because every individual is so different, including the way we internalize events or consider our protective or risk factors – the result of having a traumatic response and what that looks like will vary.

JR: *What are you seeing in the families you work with?*

CN: I have a specialty in wellness, trauma-informed care, and resilience work. What we have been seeing is students and families thriving, or in distress. Some students, especially those with social anxiety, are doing really well in a virtual format. For some, the pandemic has created a lot of family bonding and projects. We hear over and over: "I have more time with my family and am connecting with them like I never have before". On the other hand, tight quarters and new norms can put a strain on the family dynamic. There may be more tension in the home, trauma impacting family members' ability to cope, screen burnout, and feelings of isolation.

JR: *What are some traumatic responses we may notice in ourselves or our children?*

CN: Trauma warning signs and symptoms can be biological, cognitive and behavioral, including but not limited to, symptoms of hyper-vigilance, withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, depression, memory and attention difficulties, and the parasympathetic nervous system on high alert, which can trigger flight, fight, or freeze responses.

Everyone's reaction can look so different. I would take a look at the CDC webpage as a great reference to assess, as well, what protective or risk factors your child may have. I would consider that first. Again, we ALL go through traumatic events in life, and those protective factors, like having strong social supports, or a resilient and empowered personality, could make all the difference in not having trauma symptoms. Another layer that makes assessing trauma complex is that its symptoms can mirror anxiety, depression, and ADHD (executive functioning) – so if your child already has these diagnoses, it could be tricky to differentiate. I would recommend checking in with a care provider who knows your kid well to help with that assessment.

JR: *I am finding this tricky to differentiate! My son is 14 —*

CN: So how do you assess between normal teenage irritability, moodiness, and acting out?

JR: *Yes! I sometimes cannot tell if I'm dealing with his attentional symptoms, a typical teenage behavior, or a trauma response.*

CN: You know your child best, so consider a few things: do they have coping skills? Are they

able to use them right now? Are they acting in a way that is different than how they normally present? Is there a big shift in their behavior? Are they withdrawing or are they always on edge? Are you worried about self-harm? Is the way they are responding to this time disrupting their daily functioning? What risk or protective factors exist? – if you are concerned at all, it would be important to open up the conversation (if you haven't already) around getting your kid additional help or support – bringing them in collectively to talk about it – asking them what they might need. Normalize their experience and mental health supports.

JR: *In terms of support, you've said that there are effective social and emotional strategies for resilience we can develop in ourselves and our children — beginning with self-care.*

CN: Yes. First, as caretakers, we need to take care of ourselves FIRST. You will not be able to support your kid if you are not healthy. Also, THEY ARE LEARNING by watching you. You have an opportunity as a parent to model self-care, coping skills, and resiliency strategies!

JR: *Can you give us some quick self-care alternatives — assuming we've had our share of baths and candles?*

CN: Yes — Homework assignment to all the parents. Build in a FIVE-minute practice every day. Is it in the morning? At lunch? At night? Often we hear —"I just don't have the time for self-care and wellness" – well, everyone has five minutes somewhere in their day. Five minutes is great because it is attainable and has a high impact.

Building in a practice will also help you sustain your wellbeing through any weather in the storm – it is a protective factor and also so preventative versus reactive. Every person has a coping skill that works best for them, so I ask – what does your wellness look like? Is it going for a run? Listening to a guided meditation on an app? Baking? Journaling? Being present in Nature? Breathing in essential oils? Coloring? Reading? Listening to or playing music? Taking a shower? Build-in five minutes of that thing each day – set a timer.

JR: *What is a five-minute practice you recommend, that maybe we haven't tried?*

CN: My favorite practice is a five-minute presence of mind meditation, which, in terms of trauma, can be very helpful to ground the self in the present. Most people don't know this, but our sensory receptors in our brain can override our emotional receptions. We can disrupt overwhelming emotions using the 5 senses. So, I do a 5 senses room scan, asking what do I see/hear/feel/smell/touch/taste? Don't believe me? Try being angry with a Red Hot in your mouth – it's impossible.

JR: *I actually have tried that! Not the Red Hot thing, but the 5 minutes/5 senses. I wrote it down in my journal as I went, and it was very helpful for my anxiety, but I never thought of it as a meditation.*

CN: A few additional tools you could add on top of this — that are quick and simple and have a high impact — are reframing, gratitude, and empowerment.

Reframing means taking negative thoughts and shifting your perspective to be more realistic or healthy. Challenge your thinking – because your thoughts are not always telling you the truth.

What does this sound and look like? Changing "I am afraid, and I know my family will get sick"

INTO “We are safe and healthy right now; we are doing everything we can to stay safe”. Reflect on your “circles of control” – like layers of an onion. What is it that I can control, can influence, or is out of my control?. Ask what can I control today? What are things I can do?

Expand the story – life is hard right now, and what else is true? There is space to feel between really horrible and really amazing.

“Thank” the different parts of ourselves. Is it our Courage? Compassion? Patience? We want to thank. Bring gratitude into conversations at dinner or at the end of each day. Ask what went well that day, or share what you did well that day. What are you grateful for that day?

All of these small reflections and questions can make you feel more positive, healthy, and more in control of your experience. I’d also like to add: put in boundaries around the news. Our emotions are a product of our surroundings and what we consume. It is understandable that the news is helpful and needed, but put some boundaries around it (30 min tops 2-3 times daily?) Ask yourself is this amount helpful? Yes or no? If no, scale back.

JR: *I am definitely guilty of resorting to news/social media when I’m bored and then really wishing I hadn’t. So, along with taking care of myself, and modeling positive, healthy behaviors to my family, what are some ways I can communicate with my children when they get off track — homework, chores, attitude, whatever — to help us avoid power struggles?*

CN: Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)…Collaborative Problem Solving was popularized by Dr. Ross Greene. One part of CPS is the different plans to enact when kids don’t meet adult expectations, especially when the demands of the environment become too much. It involves kids in the process of establishing expectations – it is not a top-down power approach – it’s collaborative! Here are the “plans”.

Plan A is the most ineffective way to influence child behavior: it is “make them”.

Plan B, on the other hand, is a great way to communicate with your kid:

* Empathy step – asking and listening (ask what, why, how…dig in and be a detective). Am I getting all the info from their perspective (without jumping in)?

* Problem definition – saying “Well here is the problem we face” or “This expectation wasn’t met.” This should be defined clearly and calmly by the parent.

*Invitation – asking “What do we do about it? What do you think?” Compromise on an agreement (say – “I wonder if there is a way to address both concerns?”).

Plan B is the best. However, if it’s not working, you can switch to Plan C.

JR: *Plan C?*

CN: Plan C involves dropping some expectations temporarily, which is useful in times like this that require flexibility/adaption (but I wouldn’t use it to excess). With Plan C, we have to ask: What is more important right now?!?! (mood, family dynamic, survival). There are new norms in the world so we have to reassess: “Are the expectations clear and achievable for a child”? Have this discussion with your kids: “How are we going to handle the new reality and what expectations

should we have of each other?" If you want to learn more visit: https://www.livesinthebalance.org/

JR: *I'm thinking lately I'm mostly a Plan C Parent — with some Plan A sprinkled in.*

CN: Learning a new skill, as parents, takes time! Try running the Plan B approach a few times and give yourself compassion if you aren't having success in the first couple of tries. You will get there!

Two more communication strategies I recommend are Receive/Appreciate/Summarize/Ask (RASA); and the active listening approach and Non-Violent Communication strategy Observe/Feel/Needs/Request (OFNR). First up – there's RASA, which asks: Are you actually listening for understanding? Or, are you waiting to respond, formulating a response, jumping in, and disrupting what your kid is saying?

JR: *Formulating, responding, jumping.*

CN: We have all been there! So how do we deeply and effectively listen?

Receive – sit back and actually listen – turn commentary off.

Appreciate – body language, verbal signals to show you are listening and understanding. Maybe make a little noise mmhmm.

Summarize – Repeat back what you have heard to demonstrate understanding, but also to see if you captured it correctly.

Ask – follow up with questions that build on what they have said.

It's simple, effective, and easy to do (especially if you struggle with being a listener)!

The Non-Violent Communication strategy — established by Marshall Rosenberg – is interpersonal communication that is meant to improve compassionate connection to others and decrease reactivity. (AWESOME) I love it because It really gives a step by step prompted formula and is easy to use.

JR: *Yes! Since learning this strategy from you, I've tried it with success a couple of times on my kid —and my husband!*

CN: It takes some practice but it is so powerful in any conversation!

JR: *It really is…please share the formula for our readers.*

CN: The Formula is Observe, Feel, Needs, Request. aka OFNR!

What I observe…(see, hear, free from evaluations/assumptions – direct observation)

I Feel … (emotion rather than thought)

What I need or value (rather than a preference or specific action)

Requests (clear without demand – enrich your life)

It sounds like this:

"When *I see and hear* that you don't want to go to class right now, *I feel* frustrated, irresponsible, out of control as a parent, because *I value* responsibility. When you don't go to class I feel as if I am failing somehow as a parent. *Would you be willing* to talk to me about why you don't want to attend class, *or we can come up with* an attendance plan together."

JR: *Honestly, that formula gave me hope, and it really did work the couple of times I could gather myself to try it. I know that you emphasize cultivating hope and joy as ways to build emotional resilience. Can you talk a little bit about that before we close?*

CN: Sure! So. interestingly enough – joy is a key player in resilience work! Cultivating moments of joy or hope improves brain function and relationships, helps heal emotional wounds and is an energy booster. It helps us sustain ourselves, our wellbeing. Joy moments break that negative thought cycle or pattern-seeking with recognizing or feeling a positive. I want to also note that you need to acknowledge what emotions are alive in the moment first before jumping to joy – forcing positivity can create despair. Brene Brown and Elena Aguilar focus a lot on this concept too! Some ideas to spark this here:

Take inventory – Ask – what inspires joy? Hope? In your kids (or yourself). Or List 5 things that are meaningful or enjoyable right now.

Grow something – Plant a seed and plant in the window. (a simple activity with a lot of impact, care for something)

Savor the little moments that feel good (a sip of iced tea, a taste of chips, a song, a nap, a stretch, a conversation)

#PayItForward – Pick 3 people or charities to help. It can be a phone call or providing a service like masks. write a letter. Connect to a global initiative, donation, way to demonstrate support.

Dance / art/ creation increases oxytocin/dopamine. Draw an object with your eyes closed and see who comes out the best, family karaoke night or Tiktok competition.

Follow inspirational leaders on Social Media or podcasts – hang up their words on the fridge or on the mirror as a daily reminder.

JR: *Thank you for sharing your amazing wealth of knowledge. I remember at the end of your webinar, you had us write down what most resonated with us. As a serial notetaker, I found this really helpful. It allowed me to drop in and identify my takeaways. If you had to do the same after this interview, what would you most want to leave us with?*

CN: Self-compassion & empathy- We are all going through a lot right now. Give yourself a break, be vulnerable; you don't have to have all the answers right now. Self-love and love for your kids go a longggg way. So focus on those self-care habits, reflect on what you are doing well, and communicate with love and empathy to your kids.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 24th, 2020 at 12:27 pm and is filed under Lifestyle
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.