

Cape Cod Institute

June 26-30, 2017

9:00am-12:15pm

Bouncing Back:

Rewiring the Brain for Resilience and Well-Being

Emotional Intelligence

S-72 image of head bowed, head smiling

In this session on **Emotional Intelligence**, we'll learn to use emotional experience and expression to shift the functioning of the brain, to perceive, regulate, manage the information coming from our own emotions and to attune to, empathize, and understand the information coming from other people's emotions, and to use emotional experience to create skillful ways of coping and rewire unskillful ways of coping.

S-73 Neuroscience Revolutionizing Thinking...

Neuroscience is revolutionizing our thinking about feelings, and fuels the normalization we can do of different - even difficult - emotions being part of being human, a *necessary* important part of being human. There's nothing wrong with you if you feel hurt, pain, angst; it's human; it's what the body-brain does.

This shift in perspective is summarized in the wonderful title of a book by psychologist Todd Kashdan at George Washington University: *The Upside of Your Dark Side*.

We can understand and help our clients understand that all emotions, every emotion we enjoy and welcome, and every emotion we dislike or dread, is a signal from our bodies to our minds, “Something important is happening! Pay Attention!” Every emotion has a specific somatic marker. We feel it in certain ways in our bodies, and every emotion has an adaptive action tendency.

S-74 Emotions

Earlier, rev up, shut down, ANS safety-danger-life threat

Every emotion, when it's not blocked or repressed, causes us to move - anger will move us to protect ourselves and those we love from danger, from harm, from injustice, from betrayal. Sadness will move us to pull in people for support and comfort. Fear will cause us to move away from danger or toxicity. Guilt, when it leads to healthy remorse, will move us to take responsibility and make amends for our mistakes and repair with those we've harmed.

This emotional intelligence has been posited in Daniel Goleman's books *Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence* to be a better predictor of success in life than family of origin socio-economic status or I.Q.

Q Goleman

Emotions stream our decisions at the outset by eliminating some options and highlighting others. Emotions guide us in facing predicaments and tasks too important to leave to intellect alone: danger, painful loss, persisting toward a goal despite frustrations, bonding with a mate, and building a family. When it comes to shaping our most important decisions and our actions, the emotional brain is as involved in reasoning as is the thinking brain.

The two emotions that are the most difficult for most people to work with are anxiety, which is really too much revving up of our nervous system, the sympathetic spike, which we worked with yesterday morning, and shame, the dorsal dive of feeling not good enough, unworthy, a failure, unlovable that causes us to withdraw and hide from other people, from life experience, which we will work with this morning.

Even those two very difficult emotions we want to expand the bandwidth of our WOT, strengthening our capacities to feel all emotions, manage emotions, get info, deal with wise action.

When we experience hurt and pain at unwanted disconnection or confusion of losing self in engulfing connection, fear of life threat can rev up into panic or terror, anger at injustice or betrayal can rev up into rage; sadness and grief at loss and disappointment can dip into despair.

By cultivating emotional intelligence: we want to help ourselves perceive (attention) experience and explore (attunement) make sense of (empathy) tolerance-embracing vulnerability of humanity (compassion)

This is all meant to manage, work with emotions, not control, not hijack, not repress. Managing, navigating the waves, we teach tools to do that, tools to strengthen PFC so we can do that.

Sometimes what's doing the hijacking of emotion is implicit memory. Story Curt and Cathy.

One evening my client Curt came to session fuming because his nine-year-old daughter, Cathy, had been punished at school for a soap fight in the girls' bathroom that she had neither instigated nor participated in but merely witnessed. Cathy had been hauled

into the principal's office that morning along with three other girls. Her protestations of innocence were ignored, and she was made to pick up trash on the playground at afternoon recess as her punishment. Curt wanted to throttle the principal, haul him in front of the school board, and sue the district for what he perceived as the school administration's shaming and bullying of his daughter.

So we went over the story. When Curt's daughter Cathy arrived home from school in tears, Curt patiently listened as Cathy sobbed out her story. As he did so, the resonance circuit in Curt's brain was picking up all the cues. Mirror neurons in his brain were firing to evoke in his own body what Cathy was feeling in hers: bewilderment, hurt, and shame. Curt's insula was conveying signals of those body sensations to the right hemisphere of his higher brain, which interpreted their emotional meaning.

When Cathy told him about having to pick up trash from the playground during recess, Curt noticed a shift in his own body. His amygdala was activating the survival response of fight. He wasn't feeling Cathy's anger: he was feeling his own. And even in that moment it felt like something more than simply a good dad wanting to protect his precious daughter from undeserved punishment.

As Curt sat in my office that evening, I could see he was still in fight mode. From across the room I could almost feel his blood

boiling. I asked him if he was willing to try a couple of things to calm down. Even though he was still in a state of “fume,” he nodded agreement.

We started with Curt placing his hand on his heart and slowly breathing into his heart center a sense of the love and tenderness he was feeling for Cathy underneath the anger. As I noticed his face soften and his body relax, I asked him to simply notice and name whatever he was feeling in that moment: the enduring anger, his concern for Cathy, his desire to protect her, whatever else he could become aware of. Focusing on the experience of the present brought his prefrontal cortex and the closely related anterior cingulate cortex back into action.

I asked Curt how far back he could trace feeling this particular flavor of anger. Now Curt’s prefrontal cortex was drawing on explicit memories stored by the hippocampus, asking, “Have I seen this before? Was it good or bad?” It was matching those signals—calls to action—with memories of how he had responded before and how well his responses had worked.

Curt’s eyes widened in surprise. He had forgotten that he had once been bullied in kindergarten by a couple of older kids. He had pushed back against those older boys until a teacher rushed out onto the playground to stop the fighting. Curt’s right hemisphere could readily associate his experience of being bullied with his perceptions of Cathy’s being bullied. His anger

wasn't only a natural impulse to protect his daughter: it was what had fueled his actions to protect himself.

As I began to convey my empathy for Curt's experience in a way that resonated with him, Curt could begin to feel some empathy for himself. The meaning-making of the left hemisphere began to kick in. Curt's anger today made perfect sense. He was gearing up to protect Cathy from what he perceived as bullying by the principal, fueled by his own implicit memories of having to do the same for himself. Now, as we explored the event more deeply, Curt's prefrontal cortex went to work integrating the meaning of his emotional experiences, past and present, with the rational search for the appropriate response. We finished the session by exploring how Curt could channel his anger into some wise action: how to use the energy of his anger to go to bat with the principal on Cathy's behalf.

Curt decided to stop by Cathy's school the next morning on his way to work and ask for Cathy to be released from class to meet with him and the principal. He told me later he managed to keep his cool in the principal's office, hearing the principal's side of things but also speaking up for Cathy, modeling for her how to speak up for herself. Curt was firm, clear, and persistent, finally persuading the principal to apologize for not listening to Cathy carefully enough the previous day and acknowledging that the punishment might have been excessive and embarrassing. Curt would have liked a public apology in front of an entire school assembly, but was satisfied with what he had accomplished and

modeled for Cathy about channeling his anger resiliently to get some good results.

Just get over it doesn't work; that's not how the brain works.

S-76 Shame - Derailer of Resilience and Neuroplasticity

A client once asked me if I knew anything about shame, I replied, somewhat flippantly, "I have a PhD in shame." I don't have a PhD in shame or anything else, but I do have long professional career of helping folks out of the emotional swamp, the undertow of shame, that is the most powerful destroyer of our resilience: the sense of inadequacy and failure, of feeling not good enough or unlovable that is the territory of toxic shame.

Shame

Shame is somewhat inevitable in the human condition. All tribes, clans, cultures, societies have to teach their young how to survive, how to remain within the norms of acceptable [and life-saving] behaviors, how to stay deserving of the group's protection if not love.

If the young developing child experiences too many moments of neglect, criticism, rejection, lack of connection, lack of mirroring and validation, the immature developing brain responds with the withdrawal from seeking connection and protection that we see in avoidant attachment, shutting down, numbing out, collapsing, “hiding. And that smallifying becomes the learned pattern of the brain.

We can also see the desperate seeking of attention and approval of the anxious attachment that comes from disconnection.

The meaning making system of brain says, “This happens to me because there’s something wrong with me and if in the future I don’t do that, I’ll be OK. If I can do what’s right and be perfect and please you, then you will love me.

Well into adulthood, whatever the triggering event might be, being blown off by a friend, failing to get a promotion at work, being criticized in front of co-workers or ridiculed at a family gathering, one of the most automatic responses is a feeling of shame, the protective dorsal dive of the shutting down of the parasympathetic nervous system. Any experience of rejection, humiliation, betrayal can trigger this implicitly conditioned feeling of shame and withdrawal and this evolutionarily hardwired response of the parasympathetic nervous system to collapsing. [Not the event but the relationships people have to themselves.] When the shame response happens, the folding over and the closing in of the body, listening is muted, learning is blocked, change is inaccessible, seemingly impossible.

S-77 Q Brene Brown

Brene Brown is an expert researcher on shame at the University of Texas-Houston, well-known to many of us by now through her TED talks and online course on shame, self-compassion, and rising strong.

Here's Brene's description of shame:

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging. Shame erodes the part of ourselves that believes we are capable of change. We cannot change and grow when we are in shame, and we can't use shame to change ourselves or others.

- Brene Brown, PhD

S-78 Healing Shame Q Rogers, Hurston

Shame has been called the great disconnecter, and we begin to help out of the swamp of shame by practicing self-awareness, self-compassion, self-acceptance, self-appreciation, self-love.

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

- Carl Rogers

Love makes the soul crawl out of its hiding place.

- Zora Neale Hurston

S-79 Q Goldstein

Just that action of paying attention to ourselves, that I care enough about myself, that I am worthy enough to pay attention to, starts to unlock some of those deep beliefs of unworthiness at a deeper level in the brain.

- Elisha Goldstein, Center for Mindful Living, Los Angeles, CA

S-80 Mindful Self-Compassion

The best protocol I have found to help people **recondition** their emotional experience toward **emotional intelligence** and to use self-directed neuroplasticity on their own is the Mindful Self-Compassion protocol developed by Kristin Neff, psychologist at University of Texas-Austin and Christopher Germer, psychologist at Harvard.

Because Mindful Self-Compassion simply brings *awareness* to the clients' experience - awareness of what is actually happening *and* their reactions to what is happening - and *acceptance* to the client's experience, acceptance of what is actually happening *and* acceptance of their reactions to what is happening.

Awareness and acceptance of themselves as the *experiencer* of their experience. Neuroscientists have shown mindfulness and compassion are two of the most powerful agents of brain change known to science, and that allows clients to rewire their brains in ways that are safe, efficient, and effective.

S-81 MSC Activates Caregiving

Mindful Self-Compassion works because it activates the caregiving system in the brain.

- Mindfulness
 - Focuses awareness on experience
 - May I accept this moment, exactly as it is
- Self-Compassion
 - Focuses kindness on experiencer
 - May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment
- Common Humanity
 - I am not alone; I am not the only one

- Activates caregiving system

There, there, I care. And that activates the release of the oxytocin that calms down the stress response and allows the brain to re-open into a larger perspective. The client shifts from reactivity and contraction to openness, engagement.

I can offer my own example of how powerful the common humanity piece can be. A few months after I moved my eighty-one-year-old dad out to live near me so that I could care for him as his health declined, he had a stroke severe enough to land him in the hospital for a few days and in a skilled nursing facility for a while after that. One morning, he became suicidal. That behavior was more than the nursing facility could take responsibility for. At 5:30 a.m. the staff called me to come and pick him up. In his confused mental state, and despite his frailty, he had managed to climb onto a second-story deck overlooking the courtyard and had threatened to jump.

When I arrived, my dad was waiting in the lobby. Getting him into my car to take him home was no problem, but I was completely bewildered about what to do next. Would he be safe at home? Did I need to move him to a board-and-care facility? Before I got in the car myself, I burst into tears. Right there on the curb in the parking lot, I collapsed and sobbed. All my fear and confusion about his failing health welled up and spilled over. The nurse who had discharged my dad saw my collapse out the window, came out of the building, sat next to me on the

curb, and gently took my hand. For the next fifteen minutes, she never said a word. She just held my hand and gently stroked my back as I cried out wave after wave of grief and anguish.

Eventually, as the tears subsided, I looked into the nurse's eyes and saw someone simply seeing me and my pain, caring for my pain and all the pain of all the family members who had ever gone through what I was going through, all the pain of the human condition. In that moment I knew that my struggle was completely seen, understood, and accepted and I knew I was not the only one. My pain was the pain of common humanity. Her perceiving and accepting that common humanity allowed me to regroup. Her presence conveyed to me that I could find my way through this dark time and helped me recover my confidence. My dad continued to live at home for another 9 months. We had a sweet journey together.

S-82 Hand gestures

- Tightly closed fists (suffering)
- Open palms (mindfulness)
- Arms outstretched (common humanity)
- Hands on heart (compassion)

You can see how essential the steps of MSC would be to help people recover from any trauma. To not run away from their

experience or to be hijacked-flooded by it either, but to be with, in an open compassionate mindful way, which allows the brain to pause and settle and shift out of any contracted reactivity into a more open, more bigger picture perspective.

S-83 Benefits

Increased motivation, efforts to learn grow, less fear of failure, greater likelihood to try again, take responsibilities for mistakes, apologies and forgiveness

As other positive emotions, less anxiety, depression, loneliness, better relationships, more social connections, more well-being

S-84 Self-Compassion break

I teach my clients to practice a self-compassion break any time they are feeling stressed, distressed, upset, worried, startled. I will combine it with the hand on the heart exercise we learned earlier. Simply pause, put your hand on your heart or your cheek. The warm safe touch is calming to the nervous system. Come into a compassionate awareness of “Ouch! This is hard! Or scary or I don’t like this” whatever acknowledges your emotional experience in the moment. And then offering phrases similar to these - whatever works. Lately I’ve been saying to myself “I’m not happy!” “May I be kind to myself in this moment.” “May I accept this moment exactly as it is.” (The

mindful awareness - the acceptance of reality - is one of the factors that help people recover from any trauma.) “May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment.” That is the key. Carl Rogers 50 years ago said, “The curious paradox is, when I accept myself exactly as I am, then I can change.”

“May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment.” Then “May I give myself all the compassion I need.” I sometimes modify that and suggest my clients say, “May I give myself all the compassion and courageous action that I need.” Those phrases and that pausing to mindfully compassionately care for one’s self as the experiencer of suffering is what shifts the functions of the brain to be able to discern options and take wise action again.

Can practice, even when not startled, just to practice. Call up small amount of negative emotion, recognize in body, focus on breathing, focus on phrases, in and out, let go. So brain already knows how to find pathway.

Story to illustrate this:

Oh no! No internet!

S-85 flow of compassion to others, from others, for self

If it's challenging for clients to offer themselves compassion (research, 72% of people find it easier to offer to compassion to others, 20% are neutral, only 8% of people feel comfortable offering themselves, compassion), exercise, offer compassion to another (pet); receive compassion from another (us); offer compassion to self or to wounded part of self. All the same emotional flow.

- Sit quietly, comfortably
- Evoke sense of receiving compassion from another
- Evoke sense of offering compassion to another
- Stay in that flow; offer compassion to one's self
- "Don't go hating on yourself."
 - - George Mumford

S - 86 Compassionate Friend

I will also very often teach a **de-conditioning** for emotional intelligence exercise in evoking a Compassionate Friend, which helps resource clients in times of trouble, and is a baby step in reaching out to other people, even people created in their imagination, which we'll learn more about in the next session on relational intelligence.

I will lead this as though you are doing the exercise in your own imagination.

If you allow yourself to sit in a comfortable posture, or lie down in a comfortable posture, coming into a sense of presence, being aware of being in your own body, in this moment, focusing your awareness on the gentle rhythm of your breathing, coming into a sense of relaxation and peacefulness, and then, when you're ready, imagining that you are in your own safe place, a place that is comfortable for you, where you can feel safe and protected, at ease, content. This may be a room in your own home, it may be a favorite bench in a park or on a hill overlooking the beach, it may be in a café with a friend. You let yourself settle into the safety and comfort of being in your safe place.

Then, you let yourself know that you are going to receive a visitor, someone older, wiser, stronger, someone who knows you and honestly cares about you a great deal. They want you to be happy, and they want to visit with you for a little while.

So you imagine this compassionate friend in quite some detail, what they look like, how they're dressed, how they move, especially what it feels like to you to be in their presence, in their energy field. Then you imagine how you meet and greet this person; do you stand up and shake hands, do you hug, do you bow? Then you imagine you get to have a conversation with this compassionate friend, so imagine how you will do that,

sitting across from each other, sitting side by side, going for a walk.

Then, you get to share with this compassionate friend some worry, some upset, some distress that's current for you now. And you imagine your compassionate friend listening receptively, openly, understandingly. You imagine how you feel being listened to and understood and accepted by this compassionate friend. Then you imagine any words of acceptance or encouragement or support your compassionate friend might have to say. If you could hear whatever you need to hear right now, what would those words be? And imagine listening, imagine what you feel as you hear these words from your compassionate friend.

When the conversation is complete and it's time for the compassionate friend to depart for now, you imagine how you say good-bye, knowing that you can visit with this compassionate friend again any time you wish to. And after your compassionate friend has departed and you are in your safe place again with yourself, you take a moment to pause, notice and reflect on your experience, any shifts in your experience of yourself or shift of the upset you were working with, knowing you have tapped into your own deep intuitive wisdom.

S-87 image of patient and caregivers

Now here's an exercise in de-conditioning for emotional intelligence that is for us as clinicians. This is an exercise in compassion for caregivers, because scientists are now redefining compassion fatigue as empathy fatigue. We are motivated to care and to help; we attune to and empathize with our clients. We take in their feelings, and sometimes take them home. Empathy fatigue. This exercise help us stay grounded and nourished ourselves as caregivers, and stay connected to the client or whoever is struggling.

Besides teaching clients the Self-Compassion break, I teach clinicians this self-compassion for caregivers practice to help with compassion-empathy fatigue and burnout.

S-88 Compassion for Caregivers

1. Sit comfortably, closing your eyes, and take a few deep, relaxing breaths. Allow yourself to feel the sensations of breathing in and breathing out. Notice how your breath nourishes your body as you inhale and soothes you body as you exhale.
2. Let your breathing find its own natural rhythm. Continue feeling the sensations of breathing in and breathing out. If you like, place your hand over your heart or any other place on your body that is soothing, as a reminder to bring not just awareness, but *loving* awareness, to your experience, and to yourself.

3. Aware of any stress you are carrying in your body, inhale fully and deeply, drawing compassion inside your body and filling every cell in your body with compassion. Let yourself be soothed by inhaling deeply, and by giving yourself the compassion you need when you experience discomfort.

4. Now focus your attention on your *in-breath*, letting yourself enjoy the sensations of breathing in, one breath after another, noticing how your in-breath nourishes every cell in your body, and then releasing your breath.

5. If you like, you can also carry a word on each in-breath, such as “nourishing,” or “loving,” or “compassion and care,” or “deep ease” or “inner peace.” Give to yourself whatever you need in this moment. You can also imagine inhaling warmth or light – whatever works for you.

6. Now, bring to mind someone to whom you would like to send warmth and kindness and care and goodwill, either *someone you love or someone who is struggling and needs compassion*. Visualize that person clearly in your mind.

7. Shift your focus now to your *out breath*. Feel your body breathe out, and send warmth and kindness and care and goodwill to this person with each exhalation. If you like, you can add a kind word with each out-breath – soothing, soothing, or ease, ease, or an image of caring and compassion.

8. Now, feel your body breathe *both in and out* – breathing in for yourself and breathing out for another. “Nourishing for me; nourishing for you.” Or “soothing for me; soothing for you.” Or whatever words works for you. Eventually, you can simply say, “one for me; one for you. One for me; one for you.” Feel the breath of kindness flowing in, flowing out.

S-89 **Caregiving with Equanimity**

As you maintain that rhythm, listen carefully to these words, letting them gently roll through your mind:

*Everyone is on his or her own life journey.
I am not the cause of this person’s suffering,
Nor is it entirely within my power to make it go away,
Even if I wish I could.
Moments like this are difficult to bear,
Yet I may still try to help if I can.*

9. Allow your breathing to flow in and out, like the gentle movement of the sea, flowing in and flowing out. Let yourself be a *part* of this limitless, boundless flow, breathing in and breathing out.

10. You can focus a little more on yourself, or a little more on the other person – whatever you need.

Breathing in for yourself and breathing out for another.
 “Nourishing for me; nourishing for you.” Or “soothing for me;
 soothing for you.” Or whatever words works for you.
 Eventually, you can simply say, “one for me; one for you. One
 for me; one for you.” Feel the breath of kindness flowing in,
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 I am not the cause of this person’s suffering,
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 Even if I wish I could.
 Moments like this are difficult to bear,
 Yet I may still try to help if I can.*

11. Then gently bring your awareness back to breathing in and out, in this moment, in this place, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

[no slide] Skillful Distraction

Whenever we’re working with powerful emotions, it’s important that we feel empowered to use another tool that is invaluable and often undervalued in managing emotions - that of skillful distraction - being able to shift the focus of attention, switch the channel. To take a break - make a cup of tea, walk the dog, call a friend, go for a swim or a bike ride - shift the focus of attention temporarily and shift the physical energy - do something different, move in a different way. When you feel settled and grounded again, then you can return to exploring the difficult

feeling or memory. It's a skillful way to transition between working with difficult emotions and cultivating positive emotions.

All of these exercises of Mindful Self-Compassion and related exercises use the positive pro-social emotion of compassion to help bring the functioning of the brain back into the window of tolerance so we can begin to deal with whatever adversity or crisis they are facing.

S-90 Using Self-Compassion to Answer the Inner Critic

- **CHANGE RELATIONSHIP TO INNER CRITIC** rather than getting rid of it
- Identify typical message/tone of inner critic
- Write letter to a friend describing reactions to inner critic
- (You write) letter from friend offering empathy, encouragement, support, suggestions
- Read friend's letter to you; write a response

Now, without a doubt the most difficult inner part to integrate into our sense of self is the inner critic, the voice that constantly runs a negative commentary about everything we do and think and feel. "How come you're still trying to get

approval from your dad (or wife, or son)? Don't you know you're a lost cause? You don't even like yourself half the time!"

Very often clients would rather get rid of the inner critic, to never ever hear from it again, and that desire is understandable. They want to be free of the misery that the inner client causes them. And...the deeper healing is to come into a different relationship to the inner critic, to understand the job it is trying to do to keep us safe from harm; it's always jumping in to make sure we don't do something stupid that would cause us to be disapproved of...and exiled...by others.

This is a **de-conditioning** exercise to come into a different relationship with the inner critic. It is a written reflection exercise. We learn more about the power of written reflection to help us get a little distance from whatever emotional turmoil might be disturbing us in session on healing trauma and moving into post-traumatic growth. For now we'll just practice this exercise.

1. Ask the client to identify a typical comment or running commentary from their inner critic that causes them to feel badly about themselves: a habitual pattern of self-criticism or self-contempt that derails their resilience or at least tries to drag their efforts to be resilient through the mud. "You're so lazy!" or "You sure are out of shape these day." Have them write down the comment as you typically hear it.

Have them notice the tone of voice the inner critic uses. Notice their own response to hearing that tone of voice inside their head.

2. Ask the client to write a letter to a trusted friend (or to you) about this comment and their struggles with it. (They won't actually mail the letter.) Have them describe what usually triggers this self-criticism; their typical reactions—body sensations, feelings, and thoughts—to hearing this inner voice; any fears of a germ of truth in the criticism; their wishes and desires for understanding and support in dealing with this repetitive pattern.

3. Putting yourselves in the place of the friend they wrote to, ask them write a letter back to themselves. Writing in their friend's voice, (or your voice) convey empathy for the pain of being pummeled by these repetitive criticisms. Acknowledge how hard it is to be vulnerable to this particular form of suffering. Include an appreciation of the client's own wholeness and goodness, all the client's strengths, all their weaknesses, including the ones the inner critic is currently harping on. Include the friend's love and acceptance of the client, exactly as they are, with all of the client's human imperfections, and the friend's understanding of all the events that created the client's way of being and their particular flavor of the universally human inner critic. The client can include any suggestions they imagine their friend might add in the letter; be sure they include the friend's care for the client's well-being and

the friend's wish that the client find their way to wise action and relief from this suffering.

4. After writing this second letter, the client puts it aside for awhile. When the client reads it again, ask them to receive and take in the compassion they have conveyed for themselves to themselves.

5. After the client has taken in the self-compassion from the second letter they wrote, ask them to write a third simple letter, this time back to the friend, (or you) thanking the friend for their support and reflecting on what the client has learned from the friend's letter. Ask the client to make a note of any new behaviors of self-care they can now follow up with, based on the encouragement they have received through these letters.

[save these letters for later in training]

BREAK

S-91 Positive Emotions Shift Brain Functioning

The human brain has evolved over millions of years to pay more attention to negative and dangerous experiences than to positive and safe ones. To survive. To survive as individual and to survive as a species. We're never not going to have this negativity bias. Originally for physical danger; now for social-emotional danger. We will pay more attention to the one negative comment our boss said in a meeting or our lover said at the dinner table than we will to the 19 other positive comments our co-workers or friends or our children said that day. That's how the brain works. The brain is a social brain and we are social beings.

S-92 image of head bowed, head smiling

Now, modern neuroscience is about 25 years old. The technology that allows scientists to peek inside the black box of the brain to see what structures of the brain light up and interact with each other when we are experiencing anger or anxiety or shame, is about 25 years old. One generation of research. And the positive psychology movement, which has investigated the power of positive emotions to shift mood and behavior is also about 25 years old. So now the research findings of modern neuroscience and the research findings of positive psychology are dovetailing to illuminate for us - not just how to work with negative or difficult emotions, but that cultivating positive emotions - compassion (that we just learned), kindness, gratitude, joy, delight, awe, love - not only shift a client's mood and shift a client's behavior. They shift the functioning of the client's brain.

Scientists and therapists are discovering that experience a positive emotion, any positive emotion, will shift the functioning of the brain out of the contraction, the narrow focus of negativity in an instant into a larger bigger perspective, again able to see the forest for the trees again. And with practice more and more steadily over time. And that shifting out of the negativity bias, the capacity to experience and take in the good of a positive moment, a positive experience, is also a huge factor in helping people recover from any trauma.

Neuroimaging has revealed that cultivating experiences of positive and prosocial emotions such as gratitude, and focusing attention on those experiences, causes an increase in neural activity in the left hemisphere of the brain, exceeding the activity in the right hemisphere. Somewhat more rational, cognitive processing. This “left shift” indicates a shift in the brain from a stance of “avoid” to a stance of “approach” in responding to experience.

Because the right hemisphere of the brain develops significantly earlier than the left and thus has more neural connections to the survival-oriented lower brain, when it comes to processing emotions and responding with action, the right hemisphere and its negativity bias (engendering anxiety, depression, and shame) can block resilient action.

Because the left hemisphere is less connected to the lower brain than is the right, it is less affected by the lower brain's orientation toward survival. And because it can draw on memories from later in life when our coping has (hopefully) become more resilient, the left hemisphere can more objectively evaluate safety or danger in a new experience, and so it tends to respond more optimistically than the right.

So positive emotions strengthen the capacity to approach rather than avoid challenges and catastrophes we and others face. They increase curiosity and engagement with circumstances and support more open-minded, optimistic, creative coping. They undo lingering negative physiological responses, helping us return to our window of tolerance. The approach stance or sense of openness to experience not only makes us feel better but also creates a flexibility in the processing of our brains that makes it far more likely that we will find a solution to our problems.

Focusing on positive emotions tends to fuel resilience by overcoming any learned helplessness, moving from languishing to flourishing, building enduring personal resources that rewire the brain in an upward spiral of greater well-being.

Focusing on positive and prosocial emotions is not meant to bypass or suppress dark, difficult afflictive emotions, not at all. We persevere in our practices of mindful empathy, learning to hold and process those afflictive emotions. We deliberately cultivate positive, prosocial emotions as a way to turbocharge

the conditioning of new circuits and new habits, new states of mind and heart, so that they become enduring traits of resilience leading to resilient action.

S-93 Benefits of Positive Emotions

- Less stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness
- block negative, envy, resentment; increase other positives
- More friendships, social support, collaboration
- divert attention from stress and worry
- Shift in perspectives, more optimism
- More creativity, productivity
- more enthused, energetic, alive
- bring closure to trauma memories
- Better health, better sleep
- People live on average 7-9 years longer

Does follow pattern: younger - happier, no responsibilities. Middle age - least happy, most responsibilities. Older - happy again; less responsibilities, more resilience, already lived through difficulties.

So we cultivate positive emotions not just to feel good but because they shift the brain out of the reactivity of the negativity

bias into a more open, engaged, ready-to-learn mode of processing in the brain.

And resilience is a direct outcome of that. Not just a correlation. A direct cause and effect outcome. More gratitude, kindness, compassion, generosity, joy, awe, love delight in our lives, more resilience and well-being. I could give you so much data. Instead, I'm going to teach you experiential exercises to help clients create that shift in their brains.

S-94 Sharing kindness exercise:

From Theodore Rubin:

Kindness is more important than wisdom. And the recognition of that is the beginning of wisdom.

And from Martin Seligman, considered the founder of the positive psychology movement:

Doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being of any exercise we have tested.

This is one of my favorite exercises to do in a training or a workshop. Reflect on a moment of kindness you have received,

earlier today, last week, back in the third grade. Jot down several examples. Choose one; find two other people to work with in a small group. Introduce yourselves, decide who's going first, and then each take a turn (two minutes) sharing some moment of kindness you have received from another human being, something that was helpful or useful. Then you go around the circle again, (one minute each) reflecting on what it was like to share your story and hear other people's stories.

S-95 image of friends talking

The energy always shifts toward openness and friendliness when people share these kinds of stories.

Gratitude - story Barry

Gratitude is another powerful positive pro-social emotion that can shift the functioning of the brain immediately and more permanently with practice over time.

A year ago, my sister-in-law phoned to tell me that my sixty-year-old brother had been rushed to the hospital with shortness of breath and pain in his chest. He was diagnosed with a blood clot in his right lung and several clots in both legs. When Mary handed the phone to Barry, I dove right into telling him how much I loved him, how glad I was that he was still alive.

And then, in the midst of all the uncertainty and dreadful possibilities, I began to feel my own gratitude for our connection: although we were two thousand miles apart, he was still present in my life. With his life depending on an intravenous drip of blood thinner, it occurred to me to suggest he try a gratitude practice. (I'm a nerd immersed in the science of gratitude, I know, but I'm a quick-thinking nerd.)

Barry is a stand-offish kind of guy, not inclined toward self-awareness practices of any kind. To my surprise, he started in, right there on the phone, grateful that Mary was there by his side, that the doctors clearly cared and seemed to know what they were doing, that his beloved poodles were safe at home, that the nurse brought him a drink of water as soon as he asked for it. It was a five-minute litany of everything he was grateful for, even as he hovered at death's door.

Barry didn't die, though the doctors insisted that he could have. The clots cleared two days later. My brother later told me he noticed a "disturbance in the force field" from so many of my friends sending prayers and blessings for his recovery. When he returned home, he became far more compliant with his doctor's suggestions regarding sleep, diet, and exercise. Whether or not Barry's gratitude practice actually saved his life, it certainly contributed to the conditioning of more resilient behaviors in his brain.

S-96 Gratitude

Cultivating the experience of gratitude is one of the easiest ways clients can access the shift in brain functioning that comes from practicing positive emotions. When a client is having a particularly difficult time I will often begin our sessions with a 5-minute gratitude free-write, both of us silently writing down things we are grateful for. We don't even have to share what we've written. The exercise shifts the client's mood, their perspective, the functioning of the brain, and we begin the session from that more open minded, more optimistic place.

I can suggest they keep a gratitude journal every day of people and experiences they are grateful for, and I always encourage them to include the web of life - people they may never meet but who keep their life going - delivering the mail, picking up the recycling, testing local water quality, staffing the emergency room. Extending our gratitude to the common humanity we are part of, the safety net we are held in.

I also suggest they work with a gratitude buddy, someone they can email, text, or phone every evening, or have coffee with once a week. One client has emailed her buddy every evening for three years.

S-97 Q Einstein - Web of Life

A hundred times every day, I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other people, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.

- Albert Einstein

Story: Barry, snow plow

Free-write 3 minutes, gratitude, people, processes, possession, web of life. Share in groups of three.

S- 98 Circle of Support

Creating a Circle of Support

We may seek refuge among good friends, people we can trust to not judge or disdain us when we become emotionally unglued or our thinking becomes unhinged: people who can simply be with us until we regroup and are ready to face the world again. These are people whose own stability and calm we can borrow until we can regain our own. They may be on our short list of “go-to” people whom we can call at 2 a.m., trusting that we will be held in what the psychologist Carl Rogers calls “unconditional positive regard,” that they will reassure us that we are (or will be) okay, even though our world is crashing around us.

If you don't have a lot of people in your life at the moment who can offer a refuge, don't be discouraged. You can create a

genuinely effective circle of support in your imagination. This circle can include people you trust and feel supported by, or it may be made up of imaginary people you would like to meet. Your circle may include a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama. It may include your own wiser self. Visualizing ourselves as encircled by real or imaginary friends who “have our back” can greatly enhance our ease and resilience as we face an unknown or frightening situation.

I experienced the power of calling on support in my imagination almost a decade ago, when I chose to have Lasik eye surgery to correct lifelong nearsightedness and astigmatism. The operation was risky, so I went into it with understandable anxiety. I had asked friends to think of me that day, at the time I was actually in surgery, so that I would feel supported and not alone during the procedure. I had to remain conscious during the operation, and focusing my eyes on the light above me so that the laser could track exactly where to reshape the cornea to give me 20/20 vision. While lying on the gurney, as still as I could, I thought of all my friends thinking of me; I took in the love and caring that I knew were being sent my way.

About ten minutes into the operation, quite suddenly, I lost all sense of anxiety. Instead I was flooded with an overpowering sense of love and belonging. There was nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all. I remained in that state of serenity for the remainder of the surgery (which was completely successful).

Imagined experiences can be nearly as powerful as actual events for creating new brain circuitry. Neuroscientists have discovered that the same neurons fire in our visual cortex when we imagine seeing a banana as when we see one for real. When you use the power of your imagination to repeatedly visualize people supporting you, you are installing a pattern of coping in your neural circuitry that you can use as a refuge in any times of difficulty or challenge.

Neil - chemo - golden Labrador

Exercise

1. Identify a specific situation for which you would like support, such as going to a supervisor to discuss a complaint or a raise, preparing for an audit by the IRS, telling your brother and sister-in-law you won't be joining them for Thanksgiving this year, or confronting your teenage son about drug paraphernalia stashed in his bedroom closet.
2. Take thirty seconds to identify at least one person you would like to have, in your imagination, by your side in this situation. Someone or several people who have been supportive of you; who have had your back. These people can be people in your life currently, in your past, even in your imagination.

3. Imagine them gathered around you, or behind you, lending you their faith in you, and their strengths in coping. Imagine them fully present, fully supportive. You're not alone.

4. Practice evoking this sense of refuge again and again in the difficult situation you're about to face, or in any difficult situation in the future, until it becomes a natural habit of your brain that you can call on any time you need it.

Evoking refuges and resources in the imagination can feel as real to the brain as having them physically present. The possibilities of using imagination to rewire our brains can stretch toward the infinite. The next time you face an unexpected challenge or crisis, notice any increased sense of inner safety as you evoke your circle of support to help you act resiliently.

11am BREAK

Lasik eye surgery

Story - Jack-Vietnam, SLPL

S-99 Positivity Portfolio (receive acceptance from others)

This exercise is a positivity portfolio, based on the work of Barbara Fredrickson and her research summarized in her book *Positivity: ...How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive*. Because we thrive when we receive the genuine support and appreciation of other people, when we feel seen and valued for who we are, we deliberately use this tool of new conditioning to create a resource of inner self-acceptance, strength and self-worth within to better deal with the stressors of life without.

You begin by asking 10 friends or co-workers to send you a card or an email with one or two sentences of what they genuinely appreciate about you. You could even begin by emailing your friends first, sharing what you appreciate about them or about the friendship, and ask them to share in return what they appreciate about you. You can also gather appreciations like this from birthday cards or holiday cards.

We may not have 10 friends we can begin this exercise with. We may have two. We begin with those two.

You gather the comments onto a single sheet of paper, then tape the comments to the computer monitor or on the refrigerator. You can carry the comments around with them in their purse or wallet or on their phone.

The exercise is to read those comments three times a day for 30 days. There's no magic number in neuroscience about three times a day for 30 days; it's simply an easy way to remember to do the exercise. When you read these comments 3 times a day, take 30 seconds each time to take in the good of receiving this support and appreciation from people who know you and care about you. If you read and receive these comments three times a day for 30 days, you will create new circuitry in your brain that supports a newer view of yourself. And that newer view becomes a valuable resource every time you need to deal with difficulties in your life, and need to believe that you can deal with them.

S-101 Take in the Good

Kindness, compassion, gratitude, joy, etc. are an important part of a client's emotional intelligence. And as my friend and colleague Rick Hanson teaches in his book *Hardwiring Happiness* and in his *Foundations of Well-Being* course, when doing these positive emotions practices, it's very important to take in the good of them. Pause, notice the feeling of the experience or the memory, get the felt sense of that positive feeling in the body, savor the feeling for 10-20-30 seconds, allow the brain time enough to process and encode the feeling in our long-term memory so now we can call upon it as a resource for our own resilience and well-being.

S-102 Integrating the Take Aways

What tools/exercises could you commit to practicing every day?

What obstacles might get in the way?

What resources could you draw on to overcome the obstacles?

Individual reflection, journaling, share in groups of three; large group Q&A