

Permission to Feel

Marc Brackett: [00:00:00] Emotional intelligence is about learning how to use our emotions wisely. And that means that emotions serve a function, they're information, they're data, right. Anger is telling us there is an injustice going on around us.

Fear is that there's impending danger, envy is I'm desiring something that someone else has that I don't think I can have maybe.

Debbie Sorensen: That was Dr. Marc Brackett on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Diana Hill: We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado.

Diana Hill: I'm Dr. Diana Hill practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And [00:01:00] from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book Of Act Metaphors.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Diana Hill: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. Psychologist off the clock is sponsored by online training and continuing education from Praxis continuing education. They offer multiple formats of high quality training, including live online

Diana Hill: courses, free webinars and on-demand courses.

Debbie Sorensen: Praxis gets some of the best names in the field. People who do really amazing trainings and you can do them so easily from home right now. I know I've really enjoyed some of the trainings that I've done in the past, and there's some great ones on the lineup coming up.

Diana Hill: Yeah, just looking at it, the lineup. Well, you can always do act immersion with Steve Hayes. That's fantastic. If you want to take a deep dive into acceptance and commitment therapy, but I was also really excited to see. Jonathan Kanter Robyn Gobin and Daniel Rosen are doing a course from ally to anti-racist, which is a six week course using the contextual behavioral model of racism to [00:02:00] cultivate personal and professional anti-racist action

I was also excited to see Dennis Tirch and Laura Silberstein. Doing a foundations of compassion focused therapy course for those that want to learn more about CFT.

Debbie Sorensen: you'll see some of our old podcast guests that we've had on the show doing Praxis training. So check it out and you'll want to go through our website offtheclockpsych.com to register because you can get a \$25 off discount code for life training events.

Hi, it's Debbie I'm here today with an episode with Dr. Mark Brackett, whose book is permission to feel unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids ourselves and our society thrive. And I'm here with Diana today to introduce the episode. One thing that's really important in this work of building emotional intelligence is to just check in and pay attention to how you're feeling.

So Diana let's start with a check-in. How are you today?

Diana Hill: Yeah. You know, I related to the episode that I am feeling really overwhelmed and [00:03:00] bogged down. How are you, how are you feeling today?

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I'm feeling overwhelmed, which seems to be the word, the word of the year, the word of the day, because I, yeah, I think that's that pretty much captures it. And, and one thing that's interesting in Dr Brackett's work is that he talks about how overwhelm and stress are words that we probably use a lot, but sometimes actually need to break down to understand them better.

What's going on. What am I really feeling? Is this really stress? Is it overwhelmed? Is it more than that? Is it more complex? How am I feeling it? What's contributing to it to just really take a look at what's happening. it takes practice to learn these skills. And he talks about working on these skills. I think. In various ways, including, you know, when you're not in the heat of the moment, you know, like when you're angry and you're about to lose it, is not the time to be practicing these skills for the first time ever.

[00:04:00] It's really, as a process,

Diana Hill: And I really think it's, it can be really simple, keeping them simple as important. So one of the simplest things that I teach my kids is what, rather than asking them, what are you feeling and have them name it right away. I think that can be hard for kids and even can be hard for us as adults is just to notice where it is in your body and point to it.

Like, where are you feeling it? Where does it hurt in our, you know, we can do that through our physical selves, but we can also do that with our emotional selves and bringing some of that embodied awareness of emotions often exist within our bodies and they have sensations to them. And then from there, like, okay, I'm noticing what this feeling feels like.

Then we can start to name it. That's a sort of a higher level, uh, emotionally cognitive skill. I think that that can. That can be really simple for us as adults too. And something that even that I use in yoga practice would be noticing where there's tightness or stuck points in your body. And can you just be aware of that point in your body, allow it to be there.

And then at some point you could even move into that stuck point and loosen it up a little bit.

[00:05:00] **Debbie Sorensen:** yeah. That piece around naming emotions. I've used handouts before that it's either a list of emotions or you've probably seen this before these emotions with faces, little cartoon

Diana Hill: faces.

They're like emojis. It's like the

Debbie Sorensen: It was a little emoji's. Yeah, it is.

Diana Hill: interesting. We're commuting. So communicating so much by emojis. And I wonder if that's part of it's like, we've lost our ability to communicate the words

Debbie Sorensen: Well, I don't know. I don't think that's new. I think it's hard. That's right. I mean, yeah, but that's a good point. And sometimes actually you need to use an emoji cause like expressing it word in words is much more difficult, but you can see the little face and yeah, I think it's, these are all tools that can just help you identify it and get a little bit more clarity about what's going on, what you're feeling, which can be really helpful.

Diana Hill: And I also like where he talks about sort of the state or context dependent learning. So state in context, dependent learning is basically you learn better a skill when you do it in the state or context that you're, you're going to be doing that skill in. [00:06:00] So if you, uh, you know, practice your guitar in a setting that's the same as where your guitars you're going to be doing the performance.

You're more likely to remember how to do that skill. So we can do that with our emotions too. And actually we've had Matthew Mackay on and, Aprilia West on to talk about emotion, efficacy, where you are actually practicing some of the skills that, uh, Dr. Brackett's talking about while you are experiencing or imagining the difficult

situation that you're going to be at. So you could imagine that he talks about his mother-in-law. You could imagine having dinner with your mother-in-law and then practicing the skillful action that you want to do in that moment, in your mind, just like a basketball player may imagine shooting hoops at night, you can do that with your emotions, and that can be really helpful in preparing.

For yourself or your, if you're working with your kids, if they're anxious about something, you can do some imaginal practice with your kids, where you guide them through what's going to happen. And then they can imagine themselves doing the skillful behavior in that difficult situation. Yeah,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. [00:07:00] Uh, a lot of this comes down to this saying that you hear some times in our professional circles, that it's not really about feeling better. It's about getting better at feeling and that's what all these skills are about. And I think it's a really important one.

Diana Hill: fantastic. I love this interview. Thank you so much for bringing it to us, Debbie. It's it's a great one.

Debbie Sorensen: Dr. Mark Brackett is a professor in the Yale child study center and founding director of the Yale center for emotional intelligence. He has published over a hundred and twenty-five scholarly articles on the role of emotions and emotional intelligence in learning decision-making creativity, relationships, health, and performance.

Mark is the lead developer of ruler, an evidence-based approach to school. Social and emotional learning. That's been adopted by over 2000 schools. And we'll talk a bit about this today.. And he is the co-founder of OJI life lab, which is a digital, emotional intelligence learning system for businesses. And he's the author of a fantastic book called permission to feel unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids ourselves and our society thrive. Mark, welcome to the podcast.

Marc Brackett: you for inviting me.

Debbie Sorensen: You're welcome. So I'm going to start with my first question here, which is a question that is. Peppered throughout your book, you ask the readers, this question multiple times, ready for it.

Marc Brackett: I'm anticipating it.

Debbie Sorensen: How do you feel right now?

Marc Brackett: Um, the word I'm going to say is overwhelmed. I just feel like, I feel like society is overwhelming. I feel like my work is overwhelming. Um, yeah, I just feel overwhelmed, but, um, I'm giving myself the permission [00:09:00] to feel it.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. I can relate to that feeling. I've been feeling that a lot lately as well.

Marc Brackett: Yeah. So that's your word too? Or do you have other words?

Debbie Sorensen: At the moment I'm feeling my, a little fluttery feeling in my heart. I think I'm a little nervous because I had to read your bio. You know, I've doing this interview, so.

Marc Brackett: I'm a little neurotic Jewish guy from Jersey, so you'll be fine.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. Great. Well, and there's a reason that you asked that question a lot, which is that checking in on how you're feeling, asking how you're feeling, being asked. How being asked how you're feeling is a big part of, of the skill set that we'll be talking about today. Let's dive in and talk about, let's start with the problem that underlies, why you're doing this work.

And I think a lot of adults and children, uh, struggled to understand their own emotions and express them in a healthy way what's going on there. And [00:10:00] why, why is this a problem?

Marc Brackett: well, I think it's a problem because we have no formal ways of teaching it. You know, we, we rely on luck, you know, that someone gets an emotion education and we

wouldn't rely on luck, right. To cultivate. A Nobel Laureate in poetry, right? We, we recognize that you have to write and write and write and get feedback and write and write and get feedback.

But we don't do that for children's and adults in our lives. And so, you know, my mission in life is to make sure that everyone gets an emotion education.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And I'm curious where just at the cultural level, I mean, what do you think. Why is that? Why is that not part of our education? Why is that not something that is sort of, you know, embedded in our regular life? Maybe it is a little bit more now I think.

Thanks

Marc Brackett: It [00:11:00] is,

Debbie Sorensen: you.

Marc Brackett: it is, but it's not systemic, you know, it's, it's add on, you know, it's not. A real part of a child's education, in my opinion, yet we're working on it. But you know, it's still, you know, there's no, um, assistant superintendent of social and emotional learning in most districts. And so there should be because it's an integral part of education, just like there's an assistant superintendent of instruction and we need one to deal with the other side of the report card.

Debbie Sorensen: do you, and I know that a lot of your work is in schools and in the education system, do you, you do feel like this is maybe starting to change. Are you seeing signs of that?

Marc Brackett: it definitely is. You know, I think sadly, you know, going through a pandemic the last year has made people ever more aware of the fact that people's emotions, you know, they're running high and without. Strategies to support [00:12:00] healthy emotion regulation nobody's functioning. Well, I can't tell you how many phone calls and how many webinars I've done on emotion regulation in the last year.

You know, teachers having panic attacks on their way to school kids, you know, having, you know, just meltdowns in their homes with remote learning, uh, parents, you know, freaking out like I'm a mom, I'm a teacher, I'm a custodian. I'm the cafeteria worker. I'm everything. And so, um, I think people are beginning to realize more than ever before that how we feel matters in what we do with our feelings matters a great deal.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I'm going to circle back later at the end of the interview and ask you more about kids in the pandemic, because I think that is on everyone's mind. Um, I'm I just reflecting on this myself. I, I do think I've seen. Some changes to in parenting and how parenting has evolved over the years. And some of the messages kids got [00:13:00] when I was a kid, I just, I don't see it a lot, at least in my circle.

And so that gives me some hope. And I think the work that you and others are doing is really important in that you're, you're helping people know parents and teachers know what to do to teach this.

Marc Brackett: that's the goal. And, and honestly, it's the adults first, anyway, because so much of the field of social and emotional learning is about an educator or a school buying something that then the teacher delivers or does with kids. And I think that's the wrong way to think about it. You know, you wouldn't ask me to teach physics, you know, it would be like really weird.

And so, um, you know, the educators who are delivering this content have to know it. And the difference between social, emotional learning content and other academic content is that not everybody has to be an expert in every academic field, but everybody who works with kids has to be an expert in SEL.

Debbie Sorensen: right. Absolutely. [00:14:00] Absolutely. Well, actually, relatedly, you, you sort of make a joke in the book that your goal is to put mental health professionals. Myself out of business, which I actually think it's great. Cause I think there's some truth to it actually, because I work with adults in my practice and I spend so much of my time working with people on these same skills, you know, identifying, being aware of their emotions, learning more helpful ways to express their emotions and that kind of thing.

Um, and actually it's a perk of being a psychologist, I think in the clinical role as you kind of learn to do this and you're always paying attention to it.. So when you think about your mission at the Yale center for emotional intelligence and sort of the [00:15:00] ramifications later in life, do you see that? I mean, are you being serious about that?

Marc Brackett: I am. Um, you mean in regard to your point about like putting all the mental health professionals out of business? No. I mean, obviously things go wrong and we have challenges in life. There's no denying that, but you know, my, my irritation is that we, as a society are very intervention focused and not prevention focused.

Right. We wait for the nervous breakdown and then we say, Oh, I got to get my kid help. We don't think, Oh, if I taught my child. To be self-aware. If I taught my child language, if I, if I taught my child effective strategies to manage, you know, their emotions, then, um, it might not lead to that breakdown. Um, and that's what drives me out of my mind, to be honest with you, is that we, um, we don't think like preventionists.

[00:16:00] **Debbie Sorensen:** That's exactly right. Teaching people, these skills early prevents a lot of problems later.

Marc Brackett: You can't just rely on you. Don't just develop these skills. They it's like any form of education has to be formalized. You know, you have to learn the words. You're not born with an air of your brain that has like emotion language built into it. Right. You got to learn the words and you've got to learn to differentiate.

Different emotions from anger, from disappointment and frustration, from overwhelm and elation, from excitement and calm from contentment. And you gotta learn how to communicate these feelings and practice that. And certainly we all know. I mean, my goodness, you know, people always think that I'm the, like the, because I'm, you know, a scientist in this space.

And I, you know, write books and stuff like that, then I'm like the leading expert in the application of these skills. And I always tell people like, you have no idea. Like I am a work in progress. And, uh, it has [00:17:00] been hard to regulate really hard. Um, and, but I have a, you know, a growth mindset around my failures around emotion regulation, and I'm like the bad day.

It's okay. Everybody has them. I can apologize. I can even do a little bit of self-forgiveness and I could try my best tomorrow, you know, to manage more effectively. And that whole process is a very reflective process. You know, it's not, it shouldn't be done in isolation. It should be done, you know, with families and with partners and in schools and in workplaces.

But you know, one of the things that you asked a while ago that I don't think I answered was like, why don't we really do this? And it's because. Historically, we have seen this aspect of human development as being weak, you know, emotions, you know, typically we see them when we say the word emotions, we think emotional, which means hysterical, which [00:18:00] means not, you know, sane, not, you know, together.

And, um, so we're not going to go there because that's like all that messy stuff for people who have mental illness and, you know, blah, blah, blah, when it's just the opposite. When we learn. How to use our emotions wisely. All great things happen. We make better decisions. We are better learners. We have better quality relationships.

Our physical and our mental health is better and we can be more creative.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think that. Work in progress stance so important because it doesn't get it. It doesn't give the impression that, Oh, you haven't figured out and you know, everyone else can figure it out and they're done forever. It really, truly is a work in progress for all of us everywhere.

Marc Brackett: about it, you know, like I was doing pretty well with my anxiety, you know, I am I'm I'm, I'm prone to feeling more startled and anxious in life. Thank you, mommy. Thank you, daddy. Thank you. My upbringing. [00:19:00] Um, but um, you know, lockdown. Quarantine, social distance, psychological, you know, my goodness, you know, I've never worked from home.

I hate working from home and it's been nine months and I'm sitting on my tuckus, you know, here in my office and I'm like, Oh, you know, and then my partner leaves to go make a film for four months. And I'm like alone with our two puppies that we had adopted for this, you know, to keep us company during the time I can, I'm like, wait a minute here.

When did I agree to be a single parent of two puppies by myself in this house trying to work and run a center like that is not easy. Um, and you know, unfortunate, imagine what it's like for people who are less fortunate, you know, than we are, who have less resources who have, you know, financial problems who have, you know, problems with food scarcity.

You can imagine what their bodies and brains are going through on a daily basis.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. [00:20:00] Yeah. Speaking of physics, I had, uh, a good friend of mine, in grad school who was in physics. And , we have this argument all the time because he had this belief that is very pervasive in our. Our culture that rational thought and emotions are sort of not just separate, but that emotions can sort of get in the way of rational thinking.

He probably didn't say that quite

Marc Brackett: no, but that's a, that is a predominant thought.

Debbie Sorensen: predominant thought he'd probably say, well, you're not making it sound worse than it was, but I would always say no, that this is, you know, that they kind of work together. Can you speak to that? Why actually emotional intelligence actually helps with thinking.

Marc Brackett: Well, that's, I think firstly, we really. All of that kind of thinking is very antiquated. You know, that there's like the thinking part of the brain and the feeling part of the brain. We like to like put things in their place and just not the way we operate our thoughts and feelings are intertwined constantly.

[00:21:00] Um, and so that alone should just let people realize that like everything has feeling and everything has thought. Just the way we are. Um, I think we're emotional intelligence comes in handy. Is that it's all about the wise use of feeling, you know, I'm, I don't know about you, but like the emotions are, my feelings have gotten the best of me a million times over the last nine months.

Yeah. Can you say that as a clinician that you've failed at regulating your feelings, is that appropriate?

Debbie Sorensen: I mean, it happens right.

Marc Brackett: Exactly. It's like exactly like, you know, um, and you know, it's like, you're caught off guard, you're tired, you're hungry, you're overwhelmed, you're scared. And like someone triggers you and you're like, you know, you go nuts. Um,

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, no me never on no, I'm just kidding. Of course. Yes, it happens to all of

Marc Brackett: there are guys, there are days like, I'm like, I know I'm losing [00:22:00] it. I'm like Mark, come on, you know, this stuff, you know, the stuff might come up in health and then I'm like, I'm go, blah, blah, blah. And then like, I can't believe I just said that. I can't believe. I just said that. Um, especially like when my partner was traveling and we'd have conversations like around 11 o'clock at night, that was not a good time.

And it was about like finances or something. Forget about it. It's like.

Debbie Sorensen: Recipe for disaster.

Marc Brackett: for disaster. So point I'm trying to make here is that emotional intelligence is about learning how to use our emotions wisely. And that means that emotions serve a function, they're information, they're data, right. Anger is telling us there is an injustice going on around us.

Fear is that there's impending danger, , Envy is I'm desiring something that someone else has that I don't think I can have maybe. And so you can allow [00:23:00] envy too, take over your life like it has for many college students, you know, I did some studies with college students here at Yale and elsewhere, and, you know, envy is the predominant emotion, you know, that is constantly thinking everyone else is better.

Everyone else is gonna have more opportunity. Everyone else can study less than. Get better grades and the list goes on and you can imagine how that can drive you out of your mind after a while, because you're just ruminating and thinking constantly about why everyone's better and you lose yourself in that process.

And so that's when emotions go down the alley of like not productive, unhelpful, emotional intelligence says, all right, let me, firstly, how am I really feeling? Cause most students say they're stressed. And then they go to the counseling center and then they tell them to take a yoga class or a mindfulness class, which drives me out of my mind because that's helpful.

I use, I do both of those things, but it's not the answer to all of life's problems. You know, if you're in an abusive [00:24:00] relationship, like yoga is not going to get you out of it, you know? So the, um, And so like this process of introspection around feeling the process of learning, helpful ways of reappraising or engaging in more positive self-talk and evaluating that is this helping me to get, you know, be more, uh, productive in life and have greater wellbeing.

That's what the work is all about.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I actually, that stress piece that you're talking about that just really stuck with me when I was reading the book, because stress, we use that word all the time. I use it myself all the time You use it as an, as an example of labeling emotions that it's actually to say that you're feeling stressed is pretty imprecise.

I, and I never really thought about the envy piece of it. Usually there's some comparison. What, what would, what would you, what would you say about stress to help people? If they're, [00:25:00] if they'd say I'm stressed right now, can you, can you help break it down for listeners?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, well, I mean, I think stress is a real thing. It's typically when you have too many demands on your time and life and you don't have the resources to deal with it all. So you're just. You're you're stressed, you're depleted, but that's one form of, you know, what we call the anxiety and fear family. You know, the example I read about in my book was one that really has still sticks with me was when I was going up for tenure as a professor back, I don't know how many years ago.

Um, I went, I was stressed. That's what I call it. I called it and I had heartburn and I went to the doctor and I'm like, you know, my father had his first heart attack at 48. I'm like, this is it. I'm having a heart time with some neurotic about my health. And, um,

Debbie Sorensen: just a little catastrophizing in

Marc Brackett: little bit. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Marc Brackett: yeah, even the best of us happened. And so, um, I go to the doctor and he's like, here's your pilot sec, [00:26:00] you know? And here's your Advan. I'm like, really? That's it. You want me to take anti-anxiety pills and like stuff from my Harper. Um, and he's like, yeah, you're going to be fine. This is what happens at places like this. I'm like, you gotta be kidding me.

Like that is not cool. And you know, after that moment, I really like took a pause and I finally did what I asked everyone else to do. I asked myself how I was feeling like really once I stressed. The truth is I wasn't really stressed. You know, I had a lot of demands, but I wasn't, I'm pretty resilient. And, you know, I got things done and I, you know, I wasn't falling apart.

Um, and then I said, well, am I afraid? Well, no, there's no danger in my life right now. Um, how about, um, anxious? Well, There's a little bit of uncertainty about whether or not I'm going to get tenure, but truth is I [00:27:00] don't. I think it's pretty good. I mean, I've got the grants. I wrote the papers and then I realized the feeling was overwhelmed.

Like their real experience. Hence, I told you I was overwhelmed, uh, when we started fuck, go figure. Um, is basically I had no freedom. So my days were packed from like, get up in the morning and do your workout from 6:45 to 7:30 and then breakfast from 7 to 8, and then get in the car and shower and then get to work by 8:30 and then work till 5:30, then go to yoga, then come home and have dinner and then work more.

And then at 11 o'clock at night, you know, close your computer, you go to bed and not, you know, be a terrible spouse. And, you know, um, and then all of a sudden I said, that's what it is. I have no freedom. And then once I realized that everything changed for me, like the heartburn went away, I started like by eight [00:28:00] o'clock, I'm like, I'm done for the day.

I'm going to watch the voice tonight. And it was like little things because all the scheduling of yoga and mindfulness and whatever it was, it didn't matter because I was so just no space and. I think that's really helpful for people to be precise in labeling their experiences, because then you realize that the yoga class may not be the answer.

Now, if you're generally just kind of stressed out and you just need like your brains and, you know, some, you know, stuff going on at work and it's pretty heavy, you know, then the yoga class might be perfect for you, you know, to just help you kind of bring the stress levels down. But if it's about a life issue, then you might need cognitive problem-solving.

You know, you can't, you can't breathe away your relationship dynamics. Right. You know this as a therapist, right. As a psychologist, you gotta, you gotta learn how to [00:29:00] have the difficult conversation

Debbie Sorensen: right.

Marc Brackett: and then manage the fear or the anxiety that you might have in that conversation because of the power dynamics or whatever heck's going on for you.

Like that's a real skill. That I don't believe we have afforded people.

Debbie Sorensen: I think you're right. That it's easy sometimes to get on the wrong track. And that's maybe what you're talking about. It's like, you're going to yoga for a relationship

Marc Brackett: That's a quick, the quick fix thing. Every one's a quick fix. And there, this is like, this is complicated. You know, like the way I like to think about it is for me. Um, I had, as you know, from reading my book, I was sexually abused as a child. So I have leftovers from that, you know, um, and even though I was in therapy as a kid and I've spent much of my life, you know, healing, I still get activated, you know, by things that are related to those experiences when I was five and 10 years old, I'm lucky that I [00:30:00] have.

Uh, lots of strategies and awareness, but I still get affected by it. The experience is still baked into my body. Um, and I was bullied horrifically as a kid in school, like terrible bullying, extortion, and just really meaningful experiences. And so, and I was, I had weight problems. I had an eating disorder and I was, I pretty much had no negative self views.

I mean, I still have them and I'm 51. And so I've had, I've had a lot of practice being self-critical. I haven't had a lot of practice being self-compassionate because it was never, it wasn't part of my development. There were no opportunities, you know, for people to help me engage in that kind of thinking about who I was and what I was experiencing.

So think about the way our brain develops. Right. I've got like. [00:31:00] Metastasized meanness and self cruelty and criticism. And I've got like a few neurons that fire for self-compassion. And so I think this is why this work is so important because as they say, you know, neurons that fire together, you know, work together, wire together, fire together.

And so, um, we gotta wire more of the self compassion. You know, the helpful strategies.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah, I have to keep, keep, keep those neurons moving. It takes practice. And I'm so appreciative that you shared your personal story, especially the traumatic aspects of it in your book, because I think it really brings it to life. Just the process that you went through personally, which really, I mean, the science backs up your work 100%, but your personal story really is very powerful.

Marc Brackett: I appreciate that. You know, it took me, it was a, you know, one of the reasons why I did it and it took me till I was like 49, writing my [00:32:00] book to say, you know what? I gotta be honest about why I do the work I do. I've always been asphalt. I hated school. I was bullied. But if I really, you know where to share with you, like, why do I do this work?

It's because. I feel like my emotional life was stolen from me as a child. You know, when you're being abused by someone who threatened you and you have to keep the disgust, the fear, whatever those feelings are, they're not good ones. They're not pleasant ones trapped in your body as a young child. I mean, think about where they have.

They go places that are just not pleasant. And so that permission to feel, which is the title of my book really comes from this idea that the adults who are raising and teaching kids need to provide the [00:33:00] context for kids to have the permission, to experience and express all their emotions. And, you know, I two lovely parents and another love me, but my parents didn't have an emotion education.

My mother grew up with like a really like crazy father and neurotic mother. And, you know, she was anxious all the time, having breakdowns as I was growing up and like watching my mother have nervous breakdowns, didn't say that's an opportunity to talk my trauma. It's like not going to go there because if I even like bring up something like she'll have a breakdown, it'll be worse.

And then my father was a tough guy who was always like, son, you gotta toughen up. You know, I even in high school, my father said something. I don't know if I've ever shared this with in public. He said something like, you know, son, I used to beat kids up. Like you I'm like dad, come on. Like, I dunno, that's we don't call that.

Like father, son bonding one-on-one and my father and I had a good relationship, but he had no clue, [00:34:00] you know, about, you know, nurturing my emotions. And so he, his mindset was survival means toughening up.

I don't know. I'm 51. I've got a fifth degree black belt now I'm still not a tough guy. So, uh, you know, I dunno, it's, it's all these mindsets that are often created for us by other people that we then start believing are the ways we have to be.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, it goes back to at the start of our conversation. It's so pervasive and. You know, it kind of keeps going down generations. If people don't learn it somewhere along the way, because you know, you can't teach it if you don't know it. And so on one of the, um, the way that you approach teaching this skill set I love, and the acronym you use is ruler, R U L E R.

And you know, people will. [00:35:00] Benefit very much from buying your book, reading it, like in detail each of these skillsets, but could you give just kind of like a nutshell overview of what the, the ruler skills are?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, of course. I think, you know, I want to put them in the context of like how they show up. And so, you know, I talk about this idea that first you got to give yourself the permission to feel. Right. You got it. There's no good or bad emotion. And you know, even myself, when I speak about this stuff, I slip into the good, bad thing.

And I really have to monitor myself because like in my soul, you know, my, my goal is to ensure that no one judges their feelings, right? There's no anxieties, not good or bad. It's an experience if we experienced that emotion for too long and it's too intense, it's harmful to

our health and wellness. But it's not a bad emotion, same thing with excitement, you know, you know, a little bit of excitement.

Great. You know, if you're excited all [00:36:00] the time, you're like annoying. Like it's, it's, you know, it's like

Debbie Sorensen: Too much of a good thing.

Marc Brackett: exactly. There you go. And then, so then you become this emotion scientist or emotion judge, based on your upbringing, you know, are you curious or critical? Are you interested in getting specific or you just clump everything?

And then it's like, okay, so what are the skills? And so there's R U L E R recognizing understanding, labeling, expressing, regulating to give credit where credit is due. You know, these are the skills of emotional intelligence that I've learned through my mentors, you to salivate Jack Mayer, who were the founders of the theory of emotional intelligence.

And over the last 20 years of my working with them and the model, I've kind of. Separated the skills a little bit more into this ruler model. And so R is for recognizing. So for example, even though we're, you know, looking at each other on zoom in this podcast, I'm [00:37:00] still trying to pick up on, you know, your facial expression, your body language, I'm listening to your vocal tones.

Um, I'm also feeling, you know, things throughout this, you know, talking about my childhood and thinking about, you know, the future around me, um, And so that's the first step and there's no, there's not necessarily language there. It could be this kind of gut visceral thing where it's like, like, do I feel like being with you or not with you?

Do I feel comfortable and safe? Do I feel uncomfortable? Do I want to approach this conversation? Do I feel like I'm in danger potentially. So I want to avoid it. That's our ruler. The U of ruler is all right, Mark. Well, what's, what's the story going on right now? You know, why are you feeling the way you're feeling?

Um, Oh, well, I have the opportunity to share more of the work with more people. And Debbie seems like a nice person to do that with and, [00:38:00] and so, Oh, okay. Well, what's the feeling associated with that experience? Well, I feel relaxed. I feel content. I feel eager. I'm excited. Okay. That's the labeling piece. So are you L in our model is really about helping people make meaning out of their own and other people's emotions.

It's very, um, it's bodily, it's cognitive. We're not doing anything yet though, with the feelings, we're just aware of what we're feeling, the EMDR. Now it's time to do something. It's the strategic aspects of emotional intelligence. So do I tell you how I'm really feeling or do I mask it? Because if I shared how I was really feeling, it might overwhelm you or you might not have to deal with it.

Right. Like, I, I didn't express my feelings when I was a kid, because either I would get sent to my room or I would, my mother would [00:39:00] yell and scream or have a breakdown. So I'm like when, uh, suppress repress eat, you know, you know, all those strategies.

Debbie Sorensen: Emotional or experiential avoidance. We sometimes call it emotional avoidance. Yeah. Yeah.

Marc Brackett: And then the question is, okay, so what do I do with these feelings?

Um, what's my strategy and these are not like so linear. I explain them in that linear way, just cause it's the only way to write a book, but like they're dynamic. Like sometimes you're like in the midst of regulating, you're calming yourself down. Like, Oh crap, I'm really anxious. And sometimes you're perceived something like, Oh, that person really doesn't like me.

Oh, I must, you know, I'm afraid, but in general, the R the U and the L work together and then the EMDR work together. Um, And my argument is that we don't teach any of this stuff.

I never had an, I mean, just like no one, no one, you [00:40:00] know, when I was coming down the stairs, having a panic attack because I was going to get beaten up on the school bus. Nobody noticed my facial expressions and, you know, Mark, what's going on? I'm noticing a shift today. No one asked me the question. You know, what might be you feeling?

What might, what might you feel? No one said to me, you know, let's think about a strategy that can help you deal with that anxiety or let's prevent that bullying from happening in the first place was like good luck and goodbye. And it's unfortunate, you know, that, you know, I've learned to, I I've, I've dealt with my resentment about this in my own life.

Um, because I recognize, you know, that my parents, they didn't know what they didn't know. And, um, and I'm also an eternal optimist about my own skill development, you know, that nothing is permanent. And so that mindset is very helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: , [00:41:00] I think this is This is. What people come to therapy often? Not always, obviously there's many other reasons, but is that they come in, maybe not even realizing it, but needing help with that, like understanding their emotions, having awareness of them and knowing what to do with them. And so, yeah, I mean, if you can learn this earlier, you'll save yourself a lot of time and money in therapy sessions later, right?

Marc Brackett: Like. Life happens too. You know, like you don't, you can't predict your future. So, you know, if you unexpectedly lose someone, you know, like many people have right now from COVID, you know, then of course you're gonna need support. And again, there's no judgment about that either.

Debbie Sorensen: no, no. And I think it's a great way to get support and to get help with these skills. Actually. I, yeah, completely.

Marc Brackett: I'm ready. I'm actually ready to go back into therapy. So if you'd like,

Debbie Sorensen: Let's [00:42:00] talk now that's funny. So one of the things that, um, you, you have so many really great suggestions for how to do these skills. I mean, and I learned so much just reading some of your thoughts about some of these things and really breaking down the emotions. One I especially love is the Meta-Moment and it's.

Very in line with my therapy approach, which is based on a more acceptance based form of cognitive behavioral therapy. And I think as I read it, I'm like, that's exactly what I'm trying to do with my clients a lot of times, but I never, you do it so succinctly and just spot on. So can you kind of walk us through just as one example of one of the skills that you offer, how do you do a Meta-Moment.

Marc Brackett: Yeah, so the Meta-Moment is a tool that I developed with my colleague, who is a therapist herself. Her name is Robin Stern and it's a four step process. And essentially I think the first step in the Meta-Moment [00:43:00] now think about this emotion regulation. There's like everyday emotion regulation. You know, I'm tired when I get up in the morning or, you know, I'm procrastinating and I've got to like Mark, just do it.

That's not a Meta-Moment, that's just everyday kind of life emotion management. Um, oftentimes we need Mehta moments, you know, when we're caught off guard. So for example, my mother-in-law was living with us during the pandemic. And one day, you know, we get, it was getting really old because she had been with us for a month or two at a time, but not seven months.

You know, she wanted to be home and she's from Panama. So it was like a whole thing. She missed her stuff in Panama. I miss my freedom, uh, and like having dinner every night with the same person, you know, and that, you know, she likes she was cooking and it was like getting old, the same foods. Um, and she didn't like feedback.

And so one night I just, cause I was really irritable and, Anyway, we got into an [00:44:00] argument and then she looked at me and she was like in Spanish, you know, are you really the director of the center for emotional intelligence? And I was thinking to myself, like in that moment, like not tonight. And so that's when I needed the Meta-Moment and that's in that moment when you're tired, you're irritable.

And you're just about to like ring someone's neck. You say, all right. Let me take that breath. Like your automatic go-to has to be not trigger or activation reaction, right? Activation breathe, activation, pause, activation, pinch your pinch yourself to not say what you want to say. And because it's in that space, right.

That we build, you know, the capacity to regulate. But when, cause we, what we do is when we go with automatic habitual responses, we just go for that jugular oftentimes. And so the Meta-Moment is first [00:45:00] over time, be aware of your triggers, which by the way, can be the littlest things. Because I grew up kind of, you know, my father wouldn't have a lot of money growing up.

My father was an air conditioning repairman. My mother had different jobs and everything was about, you know, how much did this cost and you know, everything was about money. So I am, I still have my money issues that I'm working through. And, and my partner, you know, doesn't think the way I think about money.

And so it's interesting, you know, like I said, how much, I don't know, like, you don't know. I don't understand. I know what I paid for a cup of coffee 15 years ago. And so like, you know,

like the littlest things can trigger you from like, not knowing how much something costs to mother-in-law saying like, who the heck do you think you are?

And so you're like, all right, Mark, c'mon. Take that breath. Don't say it. Don't say it, but the cool thing about the Meta-Moment is the third step, which takes training and practice, which is activating your best self. And [00:46:00] so, yeah. Mark, you are the Director of the Center for Emotions that's Oh yeah. Well, what are the characteristics of someone in that role?

Hm. Um, that's interesting. Or, you know, I used to joke about this because a student at Yale wrote about my class. When I first started teaching emotional intelligence and he called it, he called me the feelings master. And of course it was kind of funny and, you know, cheeky, but then one day I was like, well, you know what?

I am the freaking feelings master, you know? And so how does the feelings master respond to the mother-in-law? How does the feelings master respond to the stupid thing about this or the entitled student who that's one of my triggers, the entitlement, and so. All right. Mark is compat Mark. The feelings master is a wise, you know, it's like Yoda with feelings, you know?

And so then the question is, can you respond to your feeling through the [00:47:00] lens of the Yoda? And this is why it's work. It's like a muscle, but people love it. It's so helpful because you know, when you, when you. Talk to someone and strategize through the Yoda lens. Right? It's very different than Mark the triggered lens.

Again, it takes practice. It's why prevention even with the Meta-Moment is helpful. What I mean by that is that sell my mother-in-law drive me out of my mind once in a while when I was able to leave the house, but to go for a walk, let's say, I'd come back and I'd like, anticipate the whole dinner thing. I way before I opened the door to my home, I would just take a breath and I'm like, all right, Mark, what is the ideal son-in-law do right now?

How does he respond in the moment? Oh, like the ideal son-in-law says, can I help you with dinner? Or how about I cook [00:48:00] dinner tonight so I can eat when I want to eat. And so like, you can be very prevention focused even with this tool. So if you know, you're going to be activated. Why not do some planning in advance to not, um, to not allow or to prevent that from activating you.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. It's much harder to do that when you're in the heat of the moment. Sometimes practicing an advance really puts you in that space where you can yeah.

Marc Brackett: by the way, Debbie, I think is such an important thing for listeners, which is that. This requires practice in the feeling, you know, and so much of what we learn in school is done in like this cold cognitive way, like worksheets on emotion regulation.

That's not the way we are going to learn this skill. We've got to be in it

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, in real life, um, you know, the best self piece. That reminds me in acceptance and commitment therapy. We call it. Checking in with your values and using your values, having a sense of you at your [00:49:00] best. And, you know, when you're in, when you are consistent with your values, what are you doing? And then can you live those values even in the heat of the moment when it's really hard, because maybe your. Feeling emotional distress

Marc Brackett: That's the, I mean, it's why it's practice. It's a muscle, but then you also have to give yourself the permission to fail and the permission to apologize, you know, in the permission to forgive and start over. Because you're going to make mistakes.

Debbie Sorensen: completely

Marc Brackett: Let me tell you.

Debbie Sorensen: even the center of the, or the director of the Yale center of emotional intelligence. Well, yeah,

Marc Brackett: yeah, totally. Like more than you'd want to know.

Debbie Sorensen: So final question here, you know, again, I think this is an area that's on so many people's minds right now, the pandemic stress. And particularly with kids, because you do work a lot with education with [00:50:00] teaching this to young people. And I think what, you know, they're in. They're remote learning there.

They're noticing their parents' stress. They're not having their same level of fun times that they would normally you would want a child to have. Um, and I know people are worried. Is this going to impact kids emotionally in the longterm? And I hear people really concerned about that. What's this going to do?

So what words of wisdom can you share with anyone? Parents, teachers, caregivers, um, anyone who wants to. Do what they can to help kids make it through this.

Marc Brackett: I think the first is you want to kind of move away from even the way you were talking about the challenges that people are facing. Like everybody's worrying that this is going to like support healthy development because that alone like is not a great place to be psychologically, you know? And, you know, we, we create the realities that we talk about.

So I would say like move away from that thinking, just say it's different. And [00:51:00] I've really for myself, for example, I've really come, you know, I've really worked on that. Like, this is a different reality than I'm used to. It doesn't make it bad. It's just different. And I have to learn how to live in this reality.

And so I think for parents, it's an exercise in creativity. Um, in terms of, you know, firstly, you don't have to be the knower as the parent. I think every, every parent comes to like when I do these workshops for families and parents, they're always, they come in and they think. Mark's going to teach me strategies to raise an emotionally intelligent child and they leave saying, Oh shit, I've got a lot of work to do on myself. And so, it was like when I taught martial arts, I had martial arts background and I taught for many years, parents would come

and teach my kid discipline. I would be like, how about you teach them discipline? And I teach them the martial arts. It's like, that's not my job. I got them an hour a week, but more seriously.

I think [00:52:00] a principle, one permission to feel everyone gets there's no judgment. All feelings are fine. B B the emotion scientists, not the emotion. Judge. Be a curious Explorer. Compassionate, not critical. Um, try to get to the specific feelings and do what we call co-regulation. Right. So remember, as the adults who are raising kids, that you're co-responsible for their healthy, emotional development.

So practice. The breathing exercises, you know, do yoga with your kids. Um, when they're, you know, show them that you're engaging in positive, self-talk when you're stressed out or overwhelmed. And, you know, you're teaching them by example. Um, I think that's the core, you know, of the work. And then, you know, there are other things like.

No matter what your circumstances, you can always have a little bit of humor. You can always have fun, play a game. It [00:53:00] doesn't cost money to play a game. And so I just feel as if

people can get lost in their anxiety and stress, because that's what it does to you. And so finding ways to deactivate. And finding ways to challenge your catastrophic thinking. Like, you know, like, you know, white women were like in April, like when really it was like, everybody was like, you can't go out, you can't go to the grocery store that there's no toilet paper, the stock market's crashing.

I remember sitting exactly where I'm sitting, you know, I can't go out. I'm gonna, I'm not gonna have anybody I'm never gonna retire, you know? And I'm never gonna, yeah, exactly. It was like,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Marc Brackett: You know, and then I'm like, all right, Mark, wait a minute. Like how much control do you know? How much control do you have over like the lack of toilet paper in the store?

None. All right. [00:54:00] Um, all right. How much control do you have over the stock market? None. Right? Everybody's in the same boat. Are you alone in this boat? No, everybody's in the same boat. Oh, that's interesting. So I'm not alone in this. I'm not the only one feeling like this. Everybody's feeling that way almost.

Oh, wow. That's interesting. Do you see what I'm saying? Like it's, it's, it's we can get lost, you know, in the strong emotions. And so as parents, I think the activate co-regulate be a compassionate scientist and Explorer, um, and that will be a major help.

Debbie Sorensen: that's very wise. Thank you for that. Cause yes, I think that that's helpful. It's just very grounding to think. Okay. You know, this is a hard thing, but people do hard things and. You know, we'll,

Marc Brackett: and you're let me,

Debbie Sorensen: it. It's not going to be easy. That's okay.

Marc Brackett: well, I think the critical thing for parents is that they think they [00:55:00] have to be, perfect, you know, or they have to, they can't tell their kid they're worried. But here's the thing that's interesting. Imagine this, imagine, you know, the parent who is overwhelmed and nervous about the stock market about their work and they come and they have dinner.

And so, you know, honey, you're probably noticing that daddy's a little off today. Yeah, dad, I did notice that. Yeah. Well, I'm a little worried, you know, about everything that's happening, you know, with the Corona virus. And I want to make sure that we're safe. And so let's work together on a plan to make sure that our family safe.

What do you, what are your ideas about making a plan for how we can be safe as a family? Because our safety is our priority, you know, and you know, um, I'm going to miss working with my friends at work and my colleagues. I bet you're going to probably miss some of your friends at school. So what can we do together to help us, you know, not allow that to.

Be so bad for us. What are your thoughts about how we can, you know what I'm saying? Like just real authentic [00:56:00] conversation, but like you're not denying yourself, your feelings, you're not denying your kids. Seeing it was a real human being and you're literally teaching and problem solving and developing this skill together.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. Your role modeling permission to feel, which is. Yeah. Well, thank you so much. This has been a really a fun conversation, and it's nice to get to know you. Thank you again for sharing, too, your personal experience with that. Cause that does just like in the book, it brings that to life. Um, it's been a real pleasure and we will link to all of your, you know, your webpage, your book, you have some great resources so that people can find you easily

Marc Brackett: Awesome.

Thank you so much for joining us.

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