

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

- [Speaker] Well, welcome back, everybody or good morning if you are sneaking in at nine o'clock, thinking I couldn't see that you missed all my opening comments. I promise I will not take that personally. It's my great pleasure this morning to introduce our opening keynote speaker, Dr. Rebecca Pillai Riddell. Dr. Pillai Riddell is a registered clinical psychologist licensed to work with children and adults in clinical and health psychology. She's also the York Research chair in Pain and Mental Health and director of the Opportunities to Understand Childhood hurt, the OUCH Lab in the Department of Psychology at York University. She's the nominated principal investigator for DIVERT Mental Health, a federally funded national health research and clinic training program to improve the mental health system through inclusivity and technology. In recognition of her work, she has been inducted into the Canadian Academy of Health Science and the College of the Royal Society of Canada. It's my great pleasure to welcome Dr. Pillai Riddell this morning. And with that, the virtual floor is now yours.==

- [Rebecca] Thank you so much. I'm just going to share screen and begin. There we go. So it's my pleasure today to be able to talk about some ways, evidence-based ways to build resilience during very stressful times. And truly, this is a generation defining stressful times that we're kind of coming through, we're still not at the end of, and so being able to have an opportunity to talk to frontline teachers about this is my great pleasure and honor. So I've just talked about it being stressful times, and I'm gonna start with something that you may think is a little controversial, and that's the idea that stress is actually good. And that's not what society tells us, right? Society tells us that we need to reduce our stress, manage our stress, melt our stress, make our stress disappear. But actually, stress is good in the way that it allows us to teach us to be resilient. And resilience is really about overcoming everyday stress and being able to set us up for when life goes very, very wrong. And so everyday stress is a really important aspect. We know though that the pandemic has pushed us beyond boundaries, beyond boundaries of coping, beyond boundaries, professionally, what we thought we'd be able to accomplish, in our professions and even what we thought would be possible or not possible. And we know that being able to face the stress day in and day out has really impacted the mental health, not only of children, of teachers, of all people. Study after study have come out showing that when we ask people about things like anxiety and depression, that things have gone up 30 to 40%.

So the idea that people are remote, are stressed and everyone is stressed and more stressed than they've ever been, is actually a societal problem. And so when I talk about stress being good, I have to add the caveat. You've got to actually be able to perceive your stress as manageable because it's in that act of being able to manage the stress that we gain strength and resilience. But this what teachers are facing in Ontario. this is a headline from the Toronto Star earlier this year in February, our first real year back and without lockdowns, without any sorts of shutdowns. And teachers are saying that the system is on the verge of collapse.

And when you actually look at studies from the Center for Addiction and Mental Health, a leading mental health facility in Canada and research facility, we know about 60% of people of

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

children and students are feeling depressed about the pandemic. And on the opposite end, this idea of what they're doing with that overwhelm stress, we see a 30% increase in emergency visits from youth due to self harm, which at its essence is a sign that we're so overwhelmed, we need to do something about it. And the only way they turn is to hurt themselves and enough that they're getting into emergency. So I really do believe that number underestimates because those are the ones that are actually gotten to emergency because of its severity. And then we look at Ontario schools and how are they actually prepared to meet what we often call the shadow pandemic, this mental health wave, only 10%, even actually less than 10% of schools have regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional of some kind. 45%, the other 90%, half of them only have access on call and the other half have no access. So this is what really puts the pressure. I'm coming into a talk recognizing that these are the pressures on teachers today.

And ultimately, it is a recipe for burnout. We know that when there are high demands and the demands during the pandemic have never been higher in terms of having to flexibly go and work from home, work from school, masks, trying to understand ventilation, all things that we never thought in our professions would be an important aspect, now become at the front. And then to meet these increased demands, we see that the resources have never been lower. And one's feeling of can we control what's happening? Can we control these stressors? That idea of that perception of stress is so low. And so we see these statistics that 60% of Ontario teachers are stressed all the time. And actually, adding onto that from an inclusive lens, recognizing that on top of this stress from the pandemic, 51% of black educators and 33% of two-spirit and LGBTQ plus teachers are feeling that additional stress that is impacting their wellness and their promotion from bias that they feel is embedded in the system. So it is a really tough time, and I wish that I could actually say wave a magic wand and put more government funds into education, into healthcare and into mental healthcare. But the reality is that these are things that are out of our control. So what can we control?

And so when we're thinking about living in these unprecedented times, the idea that I really want to come across is that reality is your perception. And so I always love this quote from "Harry Potter" where it's after in the last book if people follow Harry Potter, but it's this conversation about what to do next at the basically, almost the end of the world. And Harry Potter, the lead character, says, is this conversation with his mentor Dumbledore, "But is this conversation actually in my head or is it real?" And the mentor who is dead, and this conversation is happening in his Head, "Of course, it's happening in your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it's not real?" And so what I want to impress upon you is that while there is the uncontrollable, as teachers in a very stressed system, how you approach your perception of those stresses is a really critical and important way to manage stress. And so we have to be careful that we we're not talking about delusions. So delusions is like, "No, we have enough money in the system. Oh, there's lots of mental health professionals, and no, my students aren't suffering." That's not what I'm talking about when I talk about controlling your

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

perception. It's acknowledging these stressors, but actually changing how you approach, how you actually think about those real objective stressors. Because what happens is when we get stressed, we trigger a biological process through our nerve cells, into our bodies that release stress hormones that actually weaken our wellbeing, our health, and lead to mood disorders and physical stress. So we can help support our wellbeing biologically by being able to imagine and take control of how we think and how we approach reality even during these times where it's unprecedented what teachers have to go through.

And I always have to make a side note to this idea about making stress manageable and perceiving stress. And the caveat I want to put is that it is absolutely science-based to know that it is harder for some people to perceive stress as manageable. Often when you come from homes or backgrounds that are chaotic and maybe you weren't taught how to cope with the day-to-day that it can make it more difficult to have the cognitive mindset that builds resilience and helps you perceive stress as manageable. But even in that context, I do want to say that there are empirically supported scientific ways, that show optimism and hope for people who even when it's there, it's even more difficult. So recognizing that it can be what I'm talking about, it can be more difficult for some people based on your backgrounds either past or present, that there are still ways that you can try these strategies and with effort and belief actually internalize them to help make stress more manageable.

So the first ones are about the coping cup. And I use this analogy to help people understand what happens with stress. So we've kind of talked about the neurobiology that when you think stress, this releases a whole cascade of neurochemical messengers throughout the body, which then make the body produce stress hormones, which then weaken our mental and physical health. But let's take it a different way and think about it as a cup. And everybody has this cup that gets filled up with stressors and when that cup fills up, it overflows, and when it overflows, that's when we start having mental and physical health issues. I don't believe in this separation. I think it's a false dichotomy to think mental and physical health are separate. They're both intertwined. There's lots of evidence about that. And so when you think about mental health, there's a physical underpinning. And when you think about physical health, there's a mental health underpinning to that. So in this coping cup, the goal is to try and reduce the room in your cup so that you have the space at the top for the day-to-day. These are the day-to-day stressors, getting a parking ticket, having a baby throw up on your clean outfit right as you're about to walk out, having a sick child, having a principal that just gave you an assignment that was passed down to her because something was needed to be done urgently that they waited on, for example. So we need room in our cup every day for the day-to-day. We have to expect these stressful things can happen.

And so the goal is to try and reduce the room that other things spend in our cup on that day-to-day basis. And while there'll be a piece from our childhood experiences and if we have physical conditions or disabilities that take up space in our coping cup that requires our energy. There is this space in our cup that we need to work on to manage so that we have room to deal

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

with the day-to-day stressors so it doesn't overflow and have the physical and mental health complications. And so how do you keep room? How do you keep that middle layer that you can keep life manageable during very, very stressful times? First is that not to forget that you can get professional help to help you cope. Not to think about that you're on your own. There's research to show by the Mental Health Commission of Canada that actually only 39% of people use their mental health benefits. And that idea is that the vast majority of people don't even use the benefits that they have. They say they don't have the time, "Oh, I only have \$1,200 in benefits. What can that do?" A lot. So if you only have limited amount of benefits, there are a lot of things, and I like to call them using a professional, like a psychologist can be very expensive. It'd be about \$250 an hour. And I know often, there are limits, and I think with Ontario teachers, there's a benefit cap of \$225 an hour, but there are also other mental health professionals. So the first thing is to kind of think about, what kind of help could you do? What if you only had \$1,200, what would you do?

And so you are not going to change and process all of your childhood trauma up to six sessions with a psychologist or maybe 10 sessions with a social worker or clinical social worker or therapist. But you can set narrow goals. And so maybe it's an ADHD assessment, maybe it's just a mood assessment to find out what is going on? Maybe it's just an intensive succession CBT group program to help you learn some of the things I'm talking about in greater depth. So even if you don't have a lot of benefits, being able to prioritize the time actually gives you more time. And this is this idea that I talk about at the bottom of the slide of spending time to make time. What we lose track of when we are so overwhelmed, we're gonna have some thinking strategies. What we lose track of is our ability to see the forest for the trees. We get so lost in the trees or in the weeds that our day-to-day we can't figure out too much about trying to think of higher level thinking. But spending time getting professional help to help even just acknowledge your anxiety, acknowledge your depression, perhaps the ADHD, maybe there's something else. Even just having that time to acknowledge can actually free up space and make you more productive.

And then there are a lot of self-help, which again, we'll talk about that once you have this diagnosis and know, okay, maybe this is not depression, maybe it's more anxiety, but there are resources that you can do at your own pace that are freely available. I'll talk about some freely available therapies that you can do to help support. Another important, so this is taking the professional stance, trying to get a mental health professional to support is even just yourself, to take time to process day-to-day emotions. Another thing that we're in the thick of it in these, again, I'll say it unprecedented stressful times, is that the day-to-day stress adds up and we don't take time at the end of the day. Again, I understand we're spending time, but we don't take enough time to process things that bother us. And sometimes it's about talking to a colleague, talking to your spouse, or sometimes it's just about taking 10 to 15 minutes at the end of the day, instead of scrolling on your phone to write something. Write about your feelings, write why you're angry about why this happened at work or why your husband or wife didn't pick up the

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

socks that they were supposed to or trying to do something that you constantly battle with them on a daily or why your kids talked back. Even if it's just for you, what it's doing is processing that negative emotion as opposed to letting it build up in your coping cup.

The final thing I wanna talk about in terms of thinking about this coping cup and trying to build some calm in your chaos is to actually do less. Yes, easier said than done, but we forget that we spent many years not traveling, many years not socializing, not doing these things that take up time. And it's all kind of come flooding back about what it's like to travel, what it's like to the time-wise to visit, to socialize, to host, for example. What it's like to have kids in a classroom as opposed to doing it online? All of these energies that take up that time, that take up more time now because you're out of practice or because now having to drive into work that that takes time. We actually have lost a good gauge of how much our time, our life takes. And it's critical in these periods of time to do less. And so maybe pre-pandemic you were able to go and see people every day of the weekend or do that book club after school and take your children to five activities. But recognize that you are recovering. And this is a long recovery process 'cause the stress isn't going away. And maybe it's not as intense as it was during full on lockdowns in March, 2020 when we didn't know what COVID. And COVID, we were having death counts and infection counts in our minds every minute. But it's still here. It still takes up energy and the repercussions on ourselves and our children and our physical and mental health are there and therefore, our resources are less. So even trying to do the same things you did pre-pandemic are going to be harder 'cause there's just less of you available because we're recovering from this pandemic that is still going.

So again, the idea of getting professional help to use your narrow benefit that's that narrow, we talked about narrow things versus broad. If you have benefits that you can coordinate with someone or you have financial resources, being able to do deeper therapies to help take time every day to process, whether it's journaling, talking to someone. But finding a way to take that time to empty some of your cup out of those negative emotions and then really thinking about doing less because you're not the same as you were pre-pandemic.

So another aspect that I focus on, there are three areas that I'm gonna focus on. And so one is really trying to think about this coping idea and resilience and perception, but also relationships. And good relationships are necessary. So in my clinical practice as a psychologist, when I see patients, I do think it's critical to understand where you came from and those relationships with primary caregivers and with family to understand what you approach and how you approach relationships, whether they're personal or professional in your day-to-day life. And having good relationships are critical. We're social creatures and this idea of being able to use our relationships to be able to support our mental health during times when they're overwhelming like now is.

And so it is important to think about networks. And so there are different roles we all play. You can think of yourself as a man or a woman, just a person that you are not the mother, not the father, not the caregiver parents if that's on your agenda as well or as a teacher. But like

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

all of those roles individually have different needs. And so it's important to build a network of people who can give you, and I'll talk about three things, what they can kind of do for you for each of those roles that you play. So trying to be able to support yourself as a man or a woman, just as a human, as a caregiver, as a parent, as a teacher separately. And trying to think of those roles so that overall, because while they are separate roles, they're all the one person that make up you, it does actually help because we carry stress from our roles into our other roles. So helping yourself and getting help, for example, as a teacher, getting supports where you can or as a parent.

Another thing you can use your benefits for is parent consultations. There are psychologists, I'm one of them who I don't just treat parents, I also do consultations about problematic child behaviors. And those are short and intensive. And so these ideas of getting a support network will help you not to reduce your stress, empty your coping cup a little bit, leave more room for the day-to-day stressors, but also they will help you in your other roles. And so some of the things to think about when building a support network for each of these roles, heads up navigation. So this is the idea that people who building a network of people who are a little more senior than you. Talking if you have preschoolers or babies, being able to talk to parents who have children who are a little older so that they can give you a heads up or some tips. Or maybe it's a senior teacher who has tips about how to manage a certain type of problematic behavior or how to deal with the latest round of funding cuts and how to make due. So it's that idea of getting people who are a bit advanced to you to give you a heads up of what's going on.

Another really important thing is just to normalize your feelings. Feelings of overwhelm, sadness, anxiety, worry, all of these sorts of things to know you're not alone. You're not defective in any way. That feeling stressed or feeling not good enough at times is a normal part of coping with life and coping with your role as a person, a caregiver, a parent, a teacher, all of his different roles that you play. And also, very importantly, practical support, thinking about depending on others. Yes, not doing everything yourself about how you can get some practical support to make things better. And sometimes, that means teaching your children to do something or your spouse to do something that you've just said has to be done. Lowering your standards to be able to accept support. 'cause we often all believe that we can do whatever better ourselves. But actually trying to think about flexibly. How you can actually get practical support to deal with the day-to-day things on your schedule?

And the final thing I wanted to talk about in terms of direct skills is the idea of thinking. And so it's all well and good to say you've gotta think, but often in the chaos of a classroom or the chaos of home or the chaos of the grocery store at time, in these moments, it's too hard to focus. And so we really need to think about strategies to think better. Now, will you be this zen person on the couch? Like, look how clean that couch is. I just love it. I would never bring that into my house, the chaos. But the idea of being able to think better. How can we do that and integrate that into sort of the chaos of our life? And I know that we talk about the three hours of

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

teaching, of reading, writing, and arithmetic. These are three Rs of this psychologist and it's about regulating, reassessing and reason. And so what these three Rs? I'm hoping will be a little short form for you to remember is that when you are feeling stressed, the most important thing first is to regulate the feeling of stress and emotion by doing something in the moment that can help you trigger the frontal lobe. So that's that front part of your brain, the brain's boss, where all that executive thinking happens. And when we are emotional, that's a lower part in the brain.

And what it can do is it can actually block our way of really using that higher order reasoning. Because when we're very emotional, we get into this fight or flight or freeze kind of mode, which is this idea that, "I need to act and I can't think too much, I just need to run or just put up my dukes." And that is not where good thinking happens. And so in the moment of chaos, taking a few deep breaths to just regulate your emotion, it could be taking a saying a mantra to yourself alongside like, "Okay, get a grip. Get a grip." And just to take that moment, to get out of the overwhelm, get out of that lower level brain emotion stuff and actually be able to reason and think about it. And so the next step, once you've sort of engaged with that frontal lobe, we're using this kind of as a metaphor where our brain is always active at old times, but the idea of reassessing. So when we're often feeling overwhelmed, we're seeing the problem as one big overwhelming cloud cover. You can't see and you can't think, and it's just one big problem.

And the idea when you reassess is to really think about how you can break it down into smaller problems. So if it is something like, "I can't handle my kids," or "My kids have just destroyed my living room or dirty the kitchen and didn't do that," the first thing is that emotion. You have to calm and kind of reassess, "Okay, the kitchen's a disaster and I have guests coming in half an hour." And that's just overwhelming. What do you do? And you break it down. Break the kitchen down and taking out the garbage, washing the dishes and getting help. And saying, "Okay, you made this mess, you're gonna take this." And really trying to think about how you can reason the smaller problems. So on a very basic level, I'm kind of using the idea of a messy kitchen, which is a big problem, but it's really made up of smaller messes all through. And so it's that ability to be able to reassess and break it down and then start reasoning solutions for each of them. So yes, that the garbage is overflowing, yes, the dishwasher has to be unloaded, yes, the dishes are full in sink, the counters need to be wiped down. But even allowing us to break it down, even if you have no help, that idea of going from the kitchen is a mess to thinking about them into bite size manageable problems allows you to again, perceive the reality of this messy kitchen into manageable problems. So this is that idea again of being able to see stress as manageable.

And so the final slide in terms of little tips that I wanna talk about, and it's just more a way of, that I work with, with my own patients, and I talk about minding your mess. I sort of thought about it during the pandemic about trying to help people manage right when everything was just crashing around us. And we had no stability, no regularity, we didn't know we'd be showing up for work the next day, that sort of thing. And how they could focus on really

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

some wellness and wellbeing when everything is outside of their control, but knowing that they're on mess, movement, eating, sleep and stress is in their control. And so when we talk about movement, shying away from exercise, which may be too big a gap, there are requirements, I'll put it out there, recognizing that these are can be aspirational, but 150 minutes of sort of moderate activity is what they wanna do. So it's like 2 1/2 hours trying to be able to be active. But I don't put exercise there because in the thick of overwhelm sometimes, there's just not time. You can't find that time, but any sort of movement. There's been research on things called exercise snacks and I love it. And it's this concept of not being able to do half an hour, an hour at once, but trying to do five minute snacks throughout the day. Maybe it's just on your lunch going up and down stairs a couple times or walking around the school or driving somewhere and close and walking, taking a little walk in that park. But five minutes, if you can take five minute exercise snacks, it's a start. And it's just building on that behavior to get to that aspirational of what we should be getting. But even if you can't, and you have one minute to get up an and downstairs and even just starting there, that type of movement is heaven for the body. It really reduces stress. And we talk again that stress is neurobiological. So there's the brain component and the mind component and the biological component. Just even being able to take little exercise snacks to get some movement. Eating, I don't think, I'm talking to adults, I'm talking to teachers, eating healthy obviously is an important aspect. But to really understand that if you're not putting a balanced meals or vegetables or proteins into your body, this stresses the body out.

And so from a mental health perspective, eating is important too. And it's not saying not to have that junk food, but sometimes making at least one choice a day. And if you can just again, take that one minute of exercise and that one good choice a day. Maybe it's having a fruit or a vegetable or at the grocery store, picking at that one little thing and leaving something on the couch when something's in the house, you're gonna eat it. And so maybe it's just leaving one less good thing on there on the shelf. But it's just making choices to recognize that when we move and when we eat, it doesn't just affect our body, it affects our minds. Biologically, there's this interrelationship again, between physical and mental health. And then sleep. And so what I tell my patients and I like to think that the stress one, the one about talking to a psychologist is the most important of all of these. But if I could pick one, one thing that is the most important to physical and mental health, I would say it's sleep. We do not, as a society get enough, sleep. There is variability about how much sleep a person needs, but you need to reflect on what your needs are and get it. Because again, being sleep deprived automatically sets off our stress systems and chronic sleep deprivation, not getting the amount of sleep you need chronically puts you in that stress mode. And in that stress mode, we don't think as well, and what we don't think as well, we don't problem solve as well. And the feelings of overwhelm and our per our ability to perceive real stress as manageable is absolutely impaired. And so if get you to sleep one more hour a night, maybe it means, 'cause these phones that we have are addictive. They are meant and engineered to grab our attention and keep us scrolling.

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

And so with my patients, one of the things that we'll often work towards is some sleep habits. And often, one of the top things that easily can catch them even a half hour, more an hour more every night is just making sure that the phone doesn't get into the bedroom. And so being able to make a small change at night and that gets you that little bit more sleep will pay off in spades. And then the final ask in terms of stress is this idea of being able to manage it, to be able to talk to someone, be able to journal every day. Again, five minutes of writing it out or even when you're in the shower, just trying to think it through. Think about the stress that you've experienced in the day and try and kind of process it, acknowledge it and think about a way to move on from it so that it doesn't keep taking room in your cup. 'Cause again, our ability to cope is finite. We can't just keep shoving things in there without emptying that stuff because we need room for the day-to-day stressors. And if you keep shoving it in, it makes us shorter. Our tempers are flaring, we don't have enough patience. All of these come from nurse signs of being overwhelmed and stressed.

So I wanted to leave you the last few things I wanted to talk about, just some great resources. So I'm on the board for Strong Minds, Strong Kids, it's an amazing website or amazing organization dedicated to prevention and being able to catch things before they get problematic. In terms of just teaching resources, I know again, there's a lot to fit into their curriculum and children are all over the place, but there are so many resources here that are mapped into the Ontario curriculum. So they've taken the time, they've collaborated with teachers to make things like this different resilience aspects on their website that are digital. They have a new app called ThriveLandia, which is for older kids. But all of these different ways to sort of teach resilience to kids in a way that mapped on to the K-6 Ontario curriculum. So just that thought that this work has been done to be able to think about integrating resilience for the kids in your classroom and investing that time to help make things a little easier for you perhaps. And then just for you, you as the person, not the teacher, not the caregiver, the parent, anxiety has been soaring anxiety leading to depression. And so Anxiety Canada is a very reputable source. They have all sorts of resources. So we have these QQR codes that QR codes that you can just take a picture of and find, but there's so many resources that are free and self-oriented so that you can try and be able to take pieces of learning education, training, being able to learn strategies that we've talked about today in a session to be able to manage them on your own. Helping, making it more affordable, but allowing you to prioritize your mental health. And I think I am done. I'm excited for questions, leave enough time for discussion. So hoping this is who I am and yeah, I think that that's me.

- [Speaker] That's great. Thank you so much, Rebecca, for that presentation. I would just equip myself here without questioning list. I guess the first one is actually not so much a question. It's I guess, what do I wanna call it? A strategy which maybe you can respond to. It says, "My faith processing approach is to make a decorated journal right along with the kids in September. Keep it under the planning binder on my desk, whip it out at the end of the day and write. I think this

Webinar Transcript : Supporting Teachers During Unprecedented Times - Evidence-Based Ways to Build Resiliency

is because my next steps are, I just wonder if you'd like to comment on that strategy."

- Love it. It's really about exactly what I'm talking about in terms of processing some of those day-to-day stressors. So I'm feeling is that emotion? I'm thinking that this means, and then having a direct strategy to process that stress. And so that's that idea of managing and making it more realistic to be able to handle, because I'm not sure I mentioned this, but like again, stresses are additive and they can actually get worse the longer you wait. So if there is something at home or with a child or with a colleague and you keep letting it build up, it makes the problem bigger. And so something like that where you're identifying some emotion, a negative emotion, trying to think about what that makes you think or how it makes you feel thinking about an event and then what you can do about it is a fantastic strategy. I love it.

- [Speaker] There we are. Okay, next question. "Do you believe that working to improve executive functions will help improve support mental health or vice versa?"

- [Rebecca] Yes. So executive functioning, our ability to kind of think about pay attention, focus, problem solve, be able to switch attention, divert attention, all of those things support mental health when you're able to do it. And when you're not, we actually lose executive functioning, like I tried to say, with higher emotion. So for me, yes, once you're regulating emotion, so to me that's sort of like a second step is in getting at that higher level where for me, in my experience, learning how to regulate emotion is much more primary in that process because you can do, and I'm not sure what you meant by working on executive functioning, but I know that there are are games and apps to help you think flexibly and problem solve and all sorts of things that really work on that higher level of thinking, which is great. But in reality, if you aren't able to regulate that first R, in regulate, reassess, reason through. If you're not able to regulate, you're not gonna be able to in the moment access that beautiful executive functioning. 'Cause I feel like executive functioning is that last piece of being able to manage, like what do I do? How do I strategically get through this problem? So I think it's a fantastic thing to build on after you're confident that you can regulate emotion both in the moment like when something happens that wants, you're walking into the messy kitchen or in the longer term that you can regulate emotion and that's that day-to-day stuff to keep your cup empty. Because we can manage a lot, we keep shoving things in and that's not exactly coping, you're just kind of pushing it down and suppressing it where we need to be able to regulate that emotion on a daily basis so it doesn't add up. But yeah, absolutely, I think it's important. I would just make sure that regulation is there first.

- [Speaker] Okay, next question. Do you have any suggestions or way to help students make the connection between mental wellness and nutrition breaks, DPA and the need to make sure good use of breaks throughout the day?

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- [Rebecca] So daily physical activity, just wanna confirm DPA? Yes, it's been a while. I think that, so making that connection. So the idea of feeling stressed and understanding, it's complex. I'm just trying to think on the spot about how I would do it because eating from a child's perspective, and if we flip it, if you're feeling stressed and adults too actually. Eating something like chocolate or chips when we get stressed we crave that stuff, it feels good. And so it's this idea that teaching them this connection that yeah, it feels good to eat junk food, for example, or to just zone out in front of a game or like a screen of some kind. But in the long term, what that does is it makes us actually get our body out of shape. We're not moving enough and we feel like the less we do, the less we can do. And so it makes our bodies lazier when we kind of don't do it 'cause we get out of practice. And so that daily physical activity, being able to, it feels good as well. And talking to them maybe getting them to understand that runner's high so when they run or run in the spot or do something like that, it makes you feel good because our physical health and our mental health are absolutely connected. And so what we do is we release these and same language, like these chemicals in our body, endorphins that make us feel good. So maybe even using something like there's chemicals in our body that react to physical exercise that makes our body feel great, that gives us this feeling of feeling awesome. So I talk about that in terms of the exercise and then in terms of food, understanding this idea that those chemicals, those feelgood chemicals, maybe in our body, the feel for that is healthy food. And so you want as many of those feelgood chemicals that make us feel happy. Maybe we can even call them kind of these happy chemicals in our body and we can do that through exercise and eating and that's kind of the fuel to make to trigger them, which, it was a very simplified neurobiological explanation, works.

- [Speaker] Right, thanks Rebecca. Okay, here's a question for the modern age. "Do you have advice, suggestions around the use of cell phones in the classroom? Many of our students seem to have a true addiction to their phones. And while the phone can be a hope helpful tool from time to time, the cons of allowing students to have their phones in class seem to outweigh the pros. It feels as if some students are terribly preoccupied and on edge waiting for their next notification. Any suggestions are welcome."

- [Rebecca] That's not a million dollar question, that's a billion dollar question. I wanna say it's not my area of expertise at all, but I'm torn. So I'm a parent as well, I have two teenagers right now and understanding their relationship with their screens and trying to think about integrating it into the classroom. I can definitely see the pros that their phones are something that they want to be on, being digital, having everything digital is really how they think and act. The age of the child obviously matters and I am really not talking about in five and under by any means. And then thinking about the average age of cellphone I think is around 11. So really thinking about this tweed teen population, let's kind of define it there. However when I think about as a psychologist phones in a classroom, I think attention split attention is gonna be huge.

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You can't disable all the other apps that are going on at the time. I just don't think you can silence them but they want their notifications and you don't know how many apps to do. And so at its essence as a learning tool in that way, it's a tool that's gonna be taking them into very different directions.

And then you have to trust that when you're not sitting over them, they're not gonna be messaging and sending out messages, not just being distracted by those messages. So from a learning tool, like looking at it from a purely cognitive perspective, the split attention is obviously not going to support learning and absorption of material in that way. So you also kind of described like a dependency and we can talk about what it feels like and again, not knowing this literature very well, but there's definitely from anecdotal experience, this physical need to be connected, but also with that is actually problems. With the idea of that not only that time dependency, but like an esteem dependency on being liked, there's cyber bullying that's going on, so there are a lot of things that go wrong with it. And all of these things, so I've talked about it being a distraction. I think it can cause emotional damage. There's the idea that the more screens. Absolutely the less physically active, that research has been clear, the science on that has been established for decades at this point that whether, they hadn't even done the research on and handheld as much as TV and computers and laptops with the idea of screens really being in the hands of children, like the hand of being a phenomenon of this decade really, this decade. So we're trying to kind of catch up on that.

On that same token, we're raising a generation of children who are going to live digitally in a way that we can't fathom. And so I'm 25 years out of my PhD. Many, many years out of high school and that sort of thing. And so it always amazes me the preference for children to be on screen in digital as opposed to live. And so this is where my, I don't know if anybody fully knows the implications of creating a world that is fully accessible with digital. And again, these unprecedented times of the pandemic has meant that they were on screens constantly. They were at school, at home, at parents trying to work, trying to catch up in the evenings as they're trying to facilitate being on screen. And so, I don't know. I know that as a tool, a pedagogical tool to teach there would be engagement, but that has to be weighed with this idea of the distraction and the opportunities for harming and bullying and the class just brings a whole new dimension right into the classroom. I personally feel having screen-free zones are important. And so the idea of having certain classes that you don't need to be on. And that doesn't even bring into the thing we're struggling in universities right now, and I'm sure in high schools as well, is the artificial intelligence in the ChatGPT, all of these sorts of things where they actually can be cheating.

And so what is learning is being redefined in the moment when we have artificial intelligence that can write things and put things together like what does this mean? How do we teach children to harness this technology? But then what does that mean for educators? I don't know. So I guess it's a bit of both, but realistically to me, unless you have really good controls over it at a very basic level, the cognitive piece of it, trying to think of how children process, I

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think it would interfere unless you could disable all other things on their screen.

- [Speaker] Great. Thanks for that answer, Rebecca. Next question is, do you have any tips for reducing stress for severe ASD nonverbal kiddos? Going back to working in a contained classroom and always looking for new strategies?

- [Rebecca] I don't think I would have anything on top of what I think would be standard with autism spectrum and the idea of being nonverbal. And so I think low stem and being able to follow the child's lead, so being able to contain them, being able, when they need it, being able to keep routines, things like that. But I wouldn't have anything innovative, I don't think. It's not one of my areas, I apologize, but not that anything that wouldn't be in the expertise I think that would be out there right now.

- [Speaker] That's a very fair answer. This is a very broad question. We'll see what you make of this.

- [Rebecca] Another one.

- [Speaker] "How long will the process take to heal?"

- [Rebecca] Oh, okay. Well, let's talk about healing. We keep our scars. I'm thinking about, to put it in the context of my talk, we were talking about what could you do with \$1,200 if that's all you had. Sometimes, there can be little things to heal from and big things. And so, it takes time and everybody's on their own timelines and it really does depend on what you're healing from. The one thing I can say is that part of healing requires yourself not to be repetitively hurt in a context where whatever you're healing from isn't still happening. And so that's why even just using something as broad as the pandemic just to see, okay, now the pandemic has passed, let's pull our socks together and let's go. Nope, I don't know if people are following the news, there's new strain there, there's going to continue to be new strains, but people are getting sick and really sick.

I'm actually seeing it in my network, my family networks where people are going, there wasn't masking and things are happening and people are getting sick. And so to be able to heal from the trauma of the pandemic, for example, when the pandemic is still going or thinking about as a teacher's perspective. To be able to say, "Okay, well now the pandemic is done, so let's deal with the kids now let's help them process and go on." Nope, there's been learning loss and emotional. We know that domestic violence in homes increased. All of these things increased during the pandemic. So healing is a process. And I don't know if we're ever fully healed as much as we're able to have these scars that we move on from and that we learn. But in anything, even grief, I describe healing from grief is more about thinking about waves crashing

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on the beach. And so when grief first happens, when loss first happens, it's just crashing. It's like, the waves are so close and they're hitting so hard right on the shore. But then there are times in life where that then, the waves get further and further away. And so they're still crashing. They're not as close to you on the shore. And that's the goal with grief in the way I do it, maybe I'm not as good a psychologist and I can't cure people like that, but there'll always sometimes be this random wave crash on the beach, but the idea of healing from grief, for example, is about having the distance to the wave so they're still there. You can see them and sometimes, they'll come close and crash over, but to get out of that period where the waves are crashing on you continuously. And that's how we cope and that's resilience. It's not that we change that the stressor never happened, but rather we perceive it as manageable. The power of perception being your reality. I feel like that's-

- [Speaker] A great answer. Thank you for that, Rebecca. Okay, here's another question from the list. "Do you have any comments regarding the effects of educators who are working when overstressed or having mental health concerns and the effects on our students?"

- [Rebecca] Can't think of any study outright to be able to quote a statistic, but absolutely does this affect kids. And absolutely do kids affect teachers. I really think we have to think about this as a dyadic relationship. Like I use diad, but it's really, at one teacher with 30 kids sort of situation. But as children are struggling, and that's why I wanted to kind of anchor it. I'm telling you to perceive all of this stuff and work on yourself, but the reality is kids are not okay. And so having to manage that and the education requirements, it's this impossible task. And so that then lowers your autonomy in that kind of formula I was talking about, which then impacts how you can be. And when we are stressed, like I said, impatience being critical and irritable are all symptoms of overwhelm. And so the idea that you would be overwhelmed and less patient and make more irritable and annoyed at what they're doing makes sense. It's not because you are not doing well, you're flawed as a teacher, you are in a situation where children are stressed and you're stressed and you're gonna feed off each other and then that brings into both of your homes and this happens. And so when I kind of were thinking about follow ups for people, and I always try and think like, if you have no resources, you could do this. When I finished a talk like this, the first one was actually for your classrooms to teach resilience. Like strong minds, strong heads works in cooperation classrooms, they work with teachers. It's an amazing resource about being able to integrate resilience.

And I think one of the brilliant things that they did was trying to map it onto the Ontario curriculum so that you're still making progress, but fundamentally, children have to be regulated to learn. That's frontal big brain executive functioning is learning. And so if they're stressed and on edge and overwhelmed because of learning losses, because of parental job losses, parental stress, 'cause parents are stressed. And so we see this network of stress rippling out. And so it's important to try and manage your own stress, that's all you can do. But then there are that the

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idea of trying to support children's stress and even giving talks, I've given talks to parenting groups just about managing their stress as well. And so trying to manage our own and learning these fundamental skills of coping, which isn't the, and I call them, they're narrow as opposed to broad, which could be this healing concept, which you could be in therapy for a long time. A year, years depending on the type of therapist you see. Like, I know psychodynamic can take years. In CBT, we don't often do it as long from my perspective. But there are different ways to use psychologists and mental health professionals see them for a short period. Then you can see them for checkups or tuneups every, six to eight weeks, which can fit into a really nicely or monthly into benefits plans that way.

- [Speaker] Wonderful. All right, I think we're gonna call it a day there on our Q&A Rebecca, I do wanna acknowledge a lot of people in the Q&A were making comments about how hurt they felt and how much they've just felt the session touched them. And for the person in the Q&A who said, "Thank you, I wish my 16 year old daughter could hear this message." The good news is, we are recording this session and you'll have access to it for 12 months once we've transcribed it and got it up on LD at school. So if you can persuade your 16-year-old daughter to watch it, you will have ample opportunity to do so. So Rebecca, thank you again for a very insightful session and thank you for plunging into a Q&A that you never can tell where they're gonna go. So it was some interesting.

- [Rebecca] No, I love that. It's an opportunity to talk to a psychologist, so I loved it. So thank you so much for the invite. This was amazing.

- [Speaker] Oh, our pleasure. And with that, folks, we are going to step into our next break and we will see you for our next session at 10:15 sharp.