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Bouncing Forward – Bouncing Forward – Recovering from the Emotional Trauma of COVID-19

Hierarchy of Human Needs

- a. Safety**
- b. Satisfaction**
- c. Connection**

About 80 years ago, a psychologist named Abraham Maslow wrote about what he called the hierarchy of needs – a theory he proposed in a paper about human motivation, in which he suggested that there are different things we need as human beings, each of which has a different weight, a different value if you will, and that some things motivate us, often unconsciously, more, and at different times in our lives, than other things do.

Many of you might have seen this pyramid in a high school psychology class – I can tell you this diagram and a bunch of lectures and discussions about what it means were the basis for about 4 courses we had to take in social work and psychology. Which makes sense because it is proven to be - not unlike that recovery path we had up on the screen a few minutes ago, going from basic survival at the bottom, to adaptation and learning, up to connection and growth and this idea that we all in some way are really motivated by trying to become the best version of ourselves – this hierarchy has become kind of the roadmap for human motivation and behavior.

We must sleep and eat and have shelter, air to breathe and clothes to keep us warm so our organs can function properly. And as we go up the pyramid – with those foundational requirements satisfied, then we innately seek safety – our overall well-being takes precedence and dominates our behavior. We become focused on preserving our physical security, our emotional wellbeing, our financial stability, and our health. And as we progress on our journeys, and we feel like our basic needs and safety obligations are fulfilled, we seek to belong, we strive to be part of some community – In whatever shape that takes, with whomever we feel closest to and connected with – be they coworkers, family members, fellow worshippers, intimate partners, mentors, whomever – this need for social belonging helps us recognize and appreciate friendship, family, and connectedness with other human beings. And at the pinnacle of our existence, Maslow suggested, we have a desire to become our best selves – creating, succeeding, parenting, inventing – whatever our values and our personal goals drive us to become, that's ultimately – once we're fed, safe, connected to other people, have some sense of

belonging, and a recognition of our worth and our value and the strengths we possess – all of that leads to, as some would say, our primary purpose.

Defining Resilience

- d. **Manage Challenges**
- e. **Protect Vulnerabilities**
- f. **Increase Resources**

Resilience is about managing the challenges we face by harnessing the power that our brains are wired to provide for us, protecting ourselves against the physical and emotional threats we face, and as we have battled these last few months, and making sure we stay adequately fed and energized by the people and things outside of us that we can activate or control and help to give us our passion and purpose.

Research on resilience has shown that we can think, feel and do things – conscious actions we can control in almost any human circumstance – that can trigger neurons in our brains to make us alert, but completely relaxed; we can do things which activate circuits and release chemicals that make us more resistant to conditions like depression and anxiety; we possess the ability – right now, today – to create the conditions in our brains and bodies that help us sleep, even digest food better.

Through our innate capacity for resilience, we can even do things that help us empathize for the well-being of others more, improve our immune systems, our heart health and even reduce physical pain symptoms.

So, there is no better time than literally right now in our lives, to bring all those resources each one of us must bear to fully activate those parts of our brains that have been protecting us in survival mode for a while now, to now move us into thriving mode. As much as our brains are super-complex machines we really can't even begin to understand, science tells us, research with trauma survivors informs us, the recovery journeys of firefighters, healthcare workers, combat veterans, nurses, and other frontline workers who have been studied for decades – all of these people and conditions that neuroscientists and mindfulness experts and others have studied for a long time, are teaching us that if we just increase our awareness and open up more to our possibility and potential, we can strengthen those connections in our brains and **manage challenges in a healthy way**. If we feed our hearts and minds with the **resources** that teach us, excite us, and get us positive and motivated, we can be more emotionally balanced and less stressed. Through effectively managing to whom and to what we invest our emotional energy, **safeguarding our vulnerabilities** and not wasting precious psychological capital, we can build the parts of our brains to make them bigger, literally, and to make them more resistant to negativity and suffering. And if we seek to connect with other like-minded and like-hearted people that nurture the best part parts of us and people we can help to do the same for them, we will feel safer, satisfied and more connected. It is about harnessing the power in our brains and the potential each one of us must recognize where we need to seek new experiences and new information, to always have a curious mind. It means we stay open to new things to learn more and move away from assumptions. Assumptions tend to be things that limit us, not expand us.

Resilience, getting through tough times, adapting better even when things are unfamiliar and unsettling, resilience is developed by doing more things that give you confidence and feed your creativity.

We are going to move up that road to recovery towards growth and greater self-awareness when we temper our emotional responses and seek out things that keep us calm and give us a chance to confront pain, uncertainty, and fear with real moral and even physical courage.

We can rewire our brains and develop those areas that keep us satisfied and connected to other people by looking for ways we can be more compassionate and connected to others.

The 8 C's

Let us look at some of the things we can do to help us right now, and really tap into that capacity so we can keep pushing through this pandemic and stay healthy and productive. Let us look at the 8C's of resilience.

g. Curiosity & Clarity

Here a few questions that might help you feed your innate curiosity and maybe actually increase your feelings of safety and belongingness and develop a more resilient mindset.

Ask yourself – what if I were more present right now? Mindfulness researchers estimate that we are usually only paying attention to the present moment, about 50% of the time. What if you were more curious about your surroundings? What if you just took 5 minutes every morning on the porch – without your phone, no TV, no social media, newspapers, no distractions – and just looked at the grass, or the pool, or the fence, or the building next to yours and just, well, took it in? What if you sat in silence for 10 minutes each night before bed without anything to focus on other than your breath. Have you even tried that before? You could simply ask yourself later today – when you have a chance to think about it and consider the answer, - ask yourself what if I were more present right now? I have never suggested to a patient or a client or a friend or myself for that matter that they consider that question and then absolutely nothing came from it. If nothing sparked, it is probably because I did not want it to – because realizing how much time I can waste in what is in the past or what I am afraid might be in the future – doesn't exactly feel great, right? So...consider the question. And the next time you sit down, after you breathe, maybe trying to find some peace in the silence – consider what talents you did not know you had or strengths you now know you possess that have surprised you over the last few months.

There are people I know who have demonstrated a level of courage and self-awareness and tolerance over these last few months that has surprised them. How have you surprised yourself?

And as you consider that question...consider also what you NEED right now. Remaining curious, being purposefully attentive and present to this moment in your life, means you are entitled to ask yourself what you need the most – do you need quiet? Do you need support? Do you need to exert yourself more through physical exercise...do you need to look for ways to help other people, or meditate more, or sleep better? DO you need to put in for a day off? Part of being present and curious is doing something with what we stop and think about and acting in healthy ways when we feel like we need something.

The next C of Resilience is CLARITY – this is a sense of being able to see situations without the distortion of fearful beliefs and intense emotions. Decision making is easier with clarity. Setting boundaries is easier. And oftentimes, as backwards as this sounds, it is a crisis that can bring about greater clarity. Our first lesson here is a reminder to breathe. As I mentioned, we can lower our stress hormone – cortisol – and increase the production of serotonin and dopamine – our feel-good chemicals – just by

taking 30 seconds, clearing our minds for a bit, and taking a few deep breaths. You can check out some of the breathing exercises available on the Calm and Headspace smartphone apps as well. Finding refuge – whether that be a physical space we go to with limited distractions, or a quiet, happy place we visualize in our minds – is important. We had signs up in the hallways of a hospital I used to work at, and it pointed to the stairwell, with the words: “In case of emergency, proceed to area of refuge” – letting us know where to go if there was a fire or a hurricane, let us say. Our sanctuary or haven does not have to be a stairwell, a safe physical place for us or even a memory of our favorite vacation spot, though.

One of the things I have found that has kept my energy level and clarity optimized each day, whether for work or time with my family, is seeking refuge in the boundaries I set and the limits I place on how much I physically sit in front of the computer, or on my phone, and work. Like many of us, those kind of unspoken rules or quiet restrictions I *had*, to keep some balance and draw the line between office and home, work and play, projects and family – these lines got blurred when home became the office...when there could be no play because we couldn't do much outdoors, at least not the ways we were used to – and, theoretically anyway, more time, less travel, no having to get ready, face traffic, or participate in the rituals we were used to before mid-march, compromised not only our routines, but the guard rails that many of us placed around those expectations that told us when to stop, when to do less and just be more. So, here is your reminder to reconstruct those boundaries and find that refuge.

And lastly here, with frustrations understandably high, fear and uncertainty still going on and the proverbial woolly mammoths and sabre tooth tigers that are the stressors we still face every day activating that fight response for many of us – let us remind ourselves not to feed the anger, perpetuate the dis-ease or lash out. Stop and consider how to respond to stressful and anxiety-provoking people and situations – do it for you, not them. Respond, do not react. You will thank yourself later for keeping that emotional clarity.

h. Confidence & Creativity

Now, let us explore confidence and creativity – 2 strengths we can continuously develop to bolster our resilience. A 2015 study by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, found that people who exhibit genuine self-confidence are generally healthier and tend to live longer. We are more optimistic, develop stronger familial and social bonds...and trust in ourselves can even lead to healthier decisions about what we eat, and when and how we exercise.

Confidence is connected to our resilience because – while it is also a strong predictor of generating other people's genuine respect - confidence plays an equally-strong role in how we respect ourselves, honor our own struggles, and see ourselves as legitimately accomplished and worthy. **Knowing** that means we can **feel** that. And feeling confident – recognizing that we are doing our best and rewarding ourselves for even the tiniest wins right now – these actions serve to strengthen our resolve and help to keep us in healthy fight mode.

And the most confident – not arrogant, not accomplished, not successful – those are different things – the most confident people are those who are congruent. They walk their talk. They are who you think they are. Not without struggles or flaws or problems or setbacks obviously, but people who are congruent are more accepting of those areas of opportunity and confident even in, especially in, their vulnerability.

One thing this COVID-19 situation has afforded us the opportunity to do, is get creative, right? Whether it is how we set up our home office, or devised home-schooling schedules for our kids, or do yoga in the living room, or attend support groups online, maybe even ways to repurpose tuna fish – like someone shared with me the other day – the fact is, we have been forced to get inspired by new things and think out of the box.

As you consider these prompts – think about who and what you have seen that has inspired you over the last few months...creative expressions in any form that maybe motivated or encouraged you. Listen, I thought about this when putting this presentation together, and I could honestly list probably 20 people and the things they have done over the last few months – with and without tuna fish – that have been seriously creative. Physical activity, whether it is walking, running, swimming, going up and down steps, jump roping, pushups – whatever – keeping our bodies moving can help to regulate how the chemicals in our brains move as well.

Lastly here, the beauty of creativity is that it is – while sometimes objectively awesome, and anyone would be impressed and motivated by certain expressions of creativity – it is about you. What is special, original, ingenious, inventive, and unique about you- so remember to give yourself permission to share that creativity with the world – whether it is art, food, writing in a journal, supporting a friend – express your thoughts and feelings in a way that honor the authenticity and congruence we talked about earlier, and allow you the freedom to be you. We are restricted enough right now – you do not need to place tighter limits on your creativity.

i. Calm & Courage

The next two C's are a powerful combination that so many of us have been witness to these last few months – especially with our healthcare professionals and first responders. Calm and courage. Talk about the most precious of resources lately, quieting our minds and cultivating some sense of peace every day has not been easy for many of us. It is difficult to stay calm when we are anxious and uncertain, right? But through that neuroplasticity, and our brain's ability to heal itself and regulate the distribution of those feel-good chemicals, we do have access to resources that can bring us calm, no matter how bad the chaos.

Calm is achieved through equilibrium – balance. We are not tilted too far one way or the other...it is kind of like being in harmony. Our thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected and measured. Part of getting calm, and staying that way, has to do with awareness of our emotions classifying them – labeling them if you will like you would be titling a word document or putting a sticker on a manilla file folder – calling our feelings what they are and what they are not, and turning towards those emotions not away from them.

So, know where you are afraid, acknowledge it to yourself and honor it. And by honor, I mean, recognize that it is real, it must be serving a purpose or a reminder or serve as an instruction for us to pay attention, even if the why is unknown to us or just uncomfortable at the time. And it is important to get the clarity, by going to that place of refuge and looking inward a bit and classify...is this anger I am experiencing, if so, what am I angry about? Am I afraid...and if that is what is, what am in danger of losing? DO I feel powerless over what is happening – is that what it is? And as we know...we might face a situation and be aware that we are feeling all those things, all at once, right? I have been angry this is

happening, afraid of its impact on me and my family when it started and completely unable to control the outcome and paralyzed for a little bit at first, when I did not know what the next right move was. Intensity of emotion can sometimes keep us from knowing what we are feeling...and sometimes our brains protect us by avoiding one emotion for the comfort and relative convenience of another one – even if it is just as potentially destructive, I mean, I will be honest with you – I would much rather be angry than afraid...because I feel more alert and in control, less vulnerable and more powerful when I am angry. But the fact is, those are countermeasures for me – it is a go-to distraction and it is an unconscious cover. So, the key here is to know what **you** feel and call it what it is so you can stay congruent and keep your thoughts, feelings, and actions in harmony.

You heard me talk about the autonomic nervous system when we started with the breathing exercise about a half hour ago. It is what automatically regulates our chemicals and bodily functions when we go in and out of fight or flight mode. Similarly, we have what is called a parasympathetic nervous system. When animals – including us – come out of fight or flight mode, our parasympathetic nervous system deactivates the stress response, cancels the code red, defcon 1 status and starts to rechannel blood flow back to our extremities, to our other less vital organs, titrates down the adrenaline and epinephrine and cortisol, and starts slowly turning up the dial on the good feeling chemicals. Scientists call this the rest and digest mode.

What I propose for all of us is that we have been fighting and running around for weeks now, and maybe have not slowed down, we have not canceled the red alert, lowered the threat level in our heads and hearts just yet, and maybe it is time to do that now. I do not mean stay less vigilant or deceive we into thinking all is good – it is not and that would be a mistake. For me, this means resting and digesting every day – asking myself where my real and perceived threat levels are at and see what is compromising my sense of calm. Because – to the last point here – it is very easy for me to get held hostage by that intensity and stay in full-on fight or flight mode and not stop, slow down, find some peace, and turn towards my emotions. It is easier to run sometimes, to get **hijacked** by sadness, anger, fear, worry and doubt. But we should only hold onto those emotions for as long as they serve us well, and then honor and file them and learn from that and grow and heal for that moment and get ready for the next time you are going to have to do ruck back up, because you will need to be properly resourced with the calm you are going to need when that time comes.

Simply put – remember where you came from and what you have overcome, honor your struggle, and wear the badge of honor that got you threw everything that got you here. Allow yourself to be real, and vulnerable and honest about what you are feeling – yes, regulate the where and with whom you externalize it – but be real about it nonetheless, and communicate your reality – which is true courage if you ask me, in a way that represents exactly who you are and what is important to you.

There is no greater courage than showing up as the person I am – flawed, fearful sometimes and scarred and beaten down a bit. But just like Teddy Roosevelt's Man in the Arena speech says – it is not the critic who counts, who points out how strong people struggle or how someone could have done something better. Credit belongs with the people in that arena – you and me – whose faces are marred by sweat and sacrifice, who strived, as Roosevelt said, to do the good deeds, even though fault and failing, spending ourselves in a worthy cause every day...and even if we did not always succeed, we were courageous, just by daring greatly. In short here.... continue to dare greatly, my friends.

j. Compassion & Connectedness

Exploring our final two C's are the building blocks of resilience that are aligned with that LOVE and BELONGING level of Maslow's pyramid, regulated by that top part of our brain - the human cortex - which fosters CONNECTION.

Let us wrap up by talking about the critical importance of compassion and connection.

Decades of clinical research has explored the psychology of human suffering. And that suffering – as unpleasant as it is – often has a bright side...compassion.

What is compassion and how is it different from empathy or altruism?

The definition of compassion is often confused with that of empathy. Empathy, as defined by researchers, is the visceral or emotional experience of another person's feelings. It is, in a sense, an automatic mirroring of another's emotion, like tearing up at a friend's sadness.

Altruism is an action that benefits someone else. It may or may not be accompanied by empathy or compassion, for example in the case of donating for tax purposes. Although these terms are related to compassion, they are not identical.

Compassion often does, of course, involve an empathic response and an altruistic behavior. But compassion is defined as the emotional response when perceiving suffering and involves an authentic desire to help alleviate that suffering.

In case you were not aware, compassion is a natural tendency. It has been hardwired in us because it is essential for human survival. Brain studies and psychology research shows that social instincts – the desire to do good for other people - activate blood flow, neural activity and induce physiologic responses in many adults, almost as much as friendship, intimacy and love for family does.

And seeking to alleviate suffering, do good for other people and get out of me, as some might say, is awesome, and wonderful and I highly suggest it. Look, I feel good about volunteering at the homeless assistance center here in Miami, doing pro bono work for trauma victims, and helping people in recovery, not because it feeds my ego, or I am being arrogant or self-serving by mentioning it. I do it and I mention it because if it can serve as a nudge or a motivator for others to find that thing, that place, those people, the service of that mission to channel their compassion and energy towards – great. Then I have helped to accomplish paying it forward.

Self-compassion is not about being self-centered. It is about being self-ish. And despite the negative connotations that word **selfish** sometimes generates, I mean it in the sense of you first, not you only, not you better, not you always – **you** first. Feed yourself the oxygen of self-love and compassion and ease your suffering before you put that oxygen mask on anyone else.

And seek to do that in the service, especially, of healing your wounds and moving you on your recovery journey to a place of better acceptance.

And that compassion is a valuable resource to us as human beings and so instrumental in helping us to boost our resilience and help us overcome adversity.

And lastly, here.... this pandemic has afforded us untold suffering and loss and grief and despair, no doubt. It has also shone a light – ironically, through required distance and forced social disconnection – it is illuminated how generous and loving and kind and connected we can be. Many of us have reached out to people we had not spoken to or texted with in years – just to see how they are doing and make sure they are okay. We have used that creativity we talked about to leverage technology to shorten the distance we have between us and the people whom we love, but have had to separate from, perhaps just to protect them. And we don't just start emails with "I hope this finds you well" ...we don't just end

calls and GoToMeetings with “stay safe and healthy” – we certainly do that a lot through, don’t we? But we do not just say and write those things, most of the time, we mean those things and we want to convey our connectedness and one-ness and unity in some way. Because like every third commercial on TV will tell you – we are all going through this together, right? But we are – cynicism and commercialism aside – we are connected in ways we were not before. So, let us keep doing that. Look, you have heard me for the last what, 40 minutes? You can tell I am not a scientist; I am not a researcher, I am not a graphic designer or a great orator, and maybe only a decent therapist.

But what I am does not matter. What I **am** is part of a larger social consciousness and part of a collective healing and shared experience that has caused me - in some ways, maybe not all – to expand my definition of WE, to redefine US, and to expand my desire to give and share connect and join in with people who would not have noticed me, nor I them, three months ago. Not out of ignorance or arrogance, or negative intention or anything...just a lack of attention towards the power of being connected, expanding my social and professional circles to include people I can continue to learn from and who can help me grow, as they have with how they have shown their resilience and their fortitude in ways that have inspired me the last few months.

So, if you see that, or recognize that as a possibility for you – that we are more connected and you can serve your wellbeing, **well** by expanding, redefining, and nurturing what’s right about others and about you, that may be as useful an exercise for each of you as it has been for me.

You know the world looked big when the data about COVID-19 started coming out – and thousands of miles and millions of people were between me and “them”. But that is not the case anymore...and I for one, will seek to keep that proverbial distance between me and others a lot shorter from now on.

Helpful Resources

k. 6 Books

If you are interested in learning more about the concepts we talked about today – here is a recommended reading list for you.

Dan Harris’s book is about mindfulness and stress reduction and there is a 10% happier app you might enjoy as well.

The researcher and author Rick Hanson, whose groundbreaking work informed much of what we presented today, has written an exceptional book about resilience.

If you were especially drawn to the science parts of this discussion, specifically about neuroplasticity and how our brain develops over time to accommodate our life’s circumstances, check out Dr. Doidge’s book – the brain that changes itself.

Some folks like more prescriptive practices, as it relates to calm and clarity and finding peace in their lives, and you will find those in the book Mindfulness.

There is a nice journal suggestion here, especially if you or someone you know is battling anxiety right now.

As mentioned here at the beginning of our webinar, Dr. Susan David’s book on emotional agility is fantastic. For anyone who is heard of Daniel Goleman and the concept of Emotional Intelligence, or what is known as EQ, this is like a Part 2 of that book and those concepts in my opinion.

Also, you can sign up for Amazon's Kindle Unlimited subscription service and get access to up to 10 books at a time – in essence, checking the digital version of these and other books out from the Amazon library, for \$10 a month. s